THE WELL IN THE DESERT

ADELINE KNAPP

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BY

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TO

A. L. C.

IN MEMORY OF DESERT DAYS
AND GREEN PASTURES

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BOOK ONE

THE VALLEY OF BACA

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THE WELL IN THE DESERT

CHAPTER I

BLUE GULCH was relaxing after the ardors of its working-day. From the direction of the Cheerful Heart Dance Hall issued sounds of mirth and festivity, and a weaving fantasy of shadows on its canvas walls proclaimed to those without that the cheerful hearts were in executive session.

A man coming furtively along Upper Broadway made a detour to avoid the bar of light that shone through the open door of the hall. He passed behind the building, and around the big fandango, where the trip of feet mingled with the tinkle of a guitar and the whirr and thump of a wheel of fortune.

"It can't be anywhere along here," he muttered,

coming back to the road and pausing to survey the starlit scene.

Blue Gulch had but one street, the two sides of which lay at different levels, separated by the wide yawn of the gulch itself, thrusting into the mountain from the desert below. From where the man stood he commanded a very complete view of the place. In nearly every house was a light, and the shadows thrown upon the canvas walls gave a fair clue to the occupations of those within; so that during the early part of each evening at least neither half of the town need be in any doubt as to how the other half was living.

The life and gaiety of the community in relaxation seemed to gather upon the upper plane. Across the gulch Lower Broadway lay in comparative darkness.

The man drew back again as a couple of shadowy forms came wavering down the road. One of these carried a lantern, which hung low at his side, revealing the heavy miners' boots of the pair, and casting grotesque shadows up the mountain-side.

"Where 's Westcott? Why ain't he along?" one asked, as they passed.

The skulking figure in the shadow strained his ears to listen, one hand pressed upon his mouth to keep back the cough that would have betrayed him.

"He 's back at his office, digging," was the careless response. "Westcott ain't a very cheerful cuss."

The two laughed lightly, and disappeared within the dance-hall.

When they were out of sight the man came forth again, hurrying past the glowing windows of the Red Light Saloon, stopping beyond it to muffle with his shapeless hat the cough that took toll of his strength. He leaned panting against a boulder, waiting to regain his breath.

The way was more dimly lighted now. He was nearing the civic center of the place, the one bit of level ground in the gulch. Here, a faint light showing from one window, was the mining company's hospital. Beyond this the man passed a big, barn-like structure of wood, that announced itself, by a huge, white-lettered sign, showing faintly in the starlight, as an eating-house. Next it was the low adobe hotel of the place, and farther on, beyond a dark gap, was a small building, boasting a door and two windows in its narrow front.

The visitor regarded this place consideringly. He thought it more than likely that it was what he sought. Light streamed from both windows and, stepping close, the prowler looked within.

What he saw was a man writing at a rough pine desk. The room was not large. One or two

chairs, a couch, and some rude shelves, where a few law books leaned; a small earthen-ware stove, now glowing with heat, completed its furnishings. The watcher's eyes yearned to that stove. He was shivering in the chill autumn night, and he wore no coat. With a muttered curse he opened the door and stepped quickly into the room.

The man inside looked up from his writing, peering past the lamp the better to see his visitor. For a moment he stared, incredulous, then, as recognition was confirmed, he softly slid a hand toward one drawer of his desk. The new-comer noted the movement.

"You can stow that," he snarled, scornfully, "I have n't got any gun."

The other's fingers had already closed upon the handle of a revolver that lay in the drawer. With the weapon in his hand he crossed quickly, from one window to the other, and carefully pulled down the shades. The intruder had stepped into the full glare of the lamp, and now bent forward, his hands upon the desk.

As he stood thus, gaunt, haggard, panting, he seemed little calculated to awaken fear. The hands that clutched the table's edge were trembling and emaciated, and of a curious, waxy pallor. This same pallor was in his drawn, sunken face, and from out the death-like mask of its whiteness

the man's deep-set eyes gazed, heavy with despair.

"I have n't got any gun, Westcott," he repeated. "You need n't be afraid. You played a damned, dirty trick on me, three years ago, but that 's all done with. I ain't here to throw it up against you; but I want you to do me a favor."

The lawyer had turned the key in the lock and stood near the door, watching him intently, noting the close-cropped head, the thin, pallid face, the nondescript garments of the wayfarer.

"You managed to escape," he finally said, slowly.

"Yes, I did." The man coughed, clutching the table for support.

"I got away last week," he explained, panting. "Yes—and I stole the clothes," with a glance at the sleeves of his rough gray shirt. "I 'm a thief, now, just like you, Westcott."

The other made an inarticulate sound in his throat.

"We 'll let all that pass," the intruder said, with a toss of one gaunt hand. "I 'm up to no harm, but I 've got to have help. I 've got out of that hell you left me in at Phoenix; but it won't do me any good. I 'm dying!"

Another fit of coughing shook him, until he reeled. Westcott pushed a chair toward him and he sank into it, still gripping the table.

"I 'm dying," he said again, when the cough

had spent itself, "and I want to get back and die in God's country."

Westcott sat down opposite him, still watching him, intently.

"I can't walk back," the man went on, "and I ain't fit to beat it back. You 're welcome to the fifteen hundred you got off me; but can't you—for the love of God, *won't* you—give me the price of a ticket back to Iowa?"

His dull, sunken eyes were akindle, and he leaned forward, an agony of eagerness in his eyes. The prison-born look of age fell from him for the moment and it became apparent that he was not only a young man, but must once have been a comely one, with a powerful frame.

"I heard you were attorney for the Company here," he went on, as Westcott still kept silent. "You ought to be able to do that for me. You had fifteen hundred of mine."

The attorney flinched, ever so slightly, then he rose, dropping the revolver into his coat pocket, and took a turn about the room.

"I—I was n't such a beast as it looks," he finally said, speaking with difficulty. "I 've been ashamed of myself: I meant to stay and try to clear you. I don't know how I came to do it; but Jim Texas swore 't was you; and I lost the money playing faro at Randy Melone's."

The brief glow in the sunken eyes had burned itself out. The man surveyed Westcott, apparently without interest.

"Jim Texas lied," he said, apathetically, "and now *you 're* lying. You paid some of that money to Raoul Marty for a horse; and you got away with most of the rest of it in your clothes. You can hear things, even in jail." This was said with a weary laugh, in which was no mirth.

"You don't always hear 'em straight," the attorney replied, with studied gentleness.

"I *was* ashamed, Barker," he went on, quickly. "I 've been sorry ever since."

"Then you 'll give me the price of a ticket?" Hope gleamed again, in the dull eyes. Westcott considered.

"I have n't got the money here," he mused; "but I think I can raise some by to-morrow. How would you get down to the railroad?"

"I 'll take care o' that—" another siege of that racking cough. Barker leaned back in his chair, faint and gasping. Westcott drew a flask and poured some of its contents into a tin cup. The other drained it, eagerly.

"That 'll help," he murmured, handing back the cup. "I ain't always so weak as this; but I 've been hitting the trail for a week, without much grub."

"Did anyone see you come in?" Westcott asked, with apparent irrelevance.

"No. I kept out of sight."

"Good!" The other nodded. "That 's what you 'll have to keep doing."

"I 've got to go out and see what I can do about that money," he continued; "and you 've got to have something to eat. I guess I 'll have to lock you in here while I 'm gone, in case anyone should come along. You need n't be afraid but that I 'll come back," he added, as the other looked up, in quick suspicion. "It 's safer so, and I want you to have something to eat."

"I sure need it," was the reply. "Mighty bad."

"I know you do; I 'll bring it soon 's I can." Westcott moved toward the door. "You lay low till I get back."

"You 're not going back on me?" Barker still studied him.

"Going back on you?" Westcott laughed, shortly.

"Lord!" he exclaimed, "Do you think I did n't have enough of that?"

He threw some lumps of coal into the little stove. "I 'll have to douse the glim," he explained, "since I 'll be out around town, and someone might wonder who 's here. You can lie down there."

He waved a hand toward the couch and Barker nodded.

"I 'm pegged out," he said, wearily. "I 'll just sit here by the fire. Lord! How long is it since I 've been warm?"

He drew his chair nearer and bent to the glow. Westcott lowered the light and blew out the flame.

"I 'll lock the door on the outside," he said, "And don't you worry, Barker: I 'll take care of you. Just trust me."

"I guess I 've got to trust you," was the helpless reply, "I can't do anything else." And Westcott stepped out into the night, locking the door behind him.

Once outside he walked along the plaza to the head of the gulch and stood looking down upon the town. The varied sounds of a mining settlement at night came plainly to his ears. A new dancer from over the border was making her first appearance at Garvanza's that evening, and the Mexicans were gathered in force. There was a crowd of miners in the Red Light Saloon. He could hear their voices.

"How I hate it all," he muttered. "I wish I was out of it!"

The post-office was on Lower Broadway in the Company's store, where a single light burned, dimly. Farther down was the school-house, where

the school-teacher labored by day, with the half-dozen white children of the town, and twice as many young Papegoes. Behind the gulch, climbing heavenward, verdureless, copper-ribbed, austere, lay the mountain, where the mines were.

Westcott had been in Blue Gulch for more than a year. He had drifted out of Phoenix after the Barker affair, glad to get away, where he was sure no one knew of the matter.

There had been no question about Barker's guilt. Jim Texas swore to having seen him knife Lundy. He could n't have saved him if he had stayed, Westcott told himself. He had never understood why they had not hung the fellow, instead of sentencing him for life.

"Better have done it outright than to kill him by inches in their hell of a jail," he thought.

But now what was to be done with the man? Westcott stood scowling at a house down the gulch. There was a light inside that threw upon the canvas side-wall the gigantic figure of a woman, coughing. It reminded him unpleasantly of Barker.

"Damn the fellow," he muttered. "Wha 'd he come up here for, anyway? He 'll never live to get back east." He walked on, turning up the collar of his coat. "It 's coming winter. The cold 'll kill him."

Again he stood pondering, while one by one the lights down the gulch went out. Then he bethought himself of his errand and went stumbling down Lower Broadway in the dark.

The storekeeper was just closing up, but the young fellow turned back to wait upon him.

"I won't keep you more 'n a minute, Farthing," he said, and proceeded to buy bread and cheese, a tin of meat and a couple of bottles of beer. A little package of tea was an after-thought.

"Going prospecting, Mr. Westcott?" the clerk asked, as he made up the packages.

"Maybe," was the reply.

Westcott was at the door as he spoke. Young Farthing was putting out the light.

"Oh, Johnnie," the attorney said, with the air of just remembering, "I want to telephone . . . 'long distance.' I 'm afraid it 'll take some time." He half hesitated.

The boy looked disappointed; he had planned to get over to the fandango in time to see the new dancer. He spoke cheerfully however.

"That 's all right, Mr. Westcott," he said, and turned up the lamp again.

"Why can't I lock up, Johnnie?" Westcott asked; "I 'll bring the key up to the hotel when I come."

"If you would n't mind—" Farthing looked

relieved, "Everything 's all right but just turning out the light," he added.

"All right." Westcott gave him a little push; "You go on," he said, cordially; "I can lock the door as hard as you!"

"I guess that 's true, Mr. Westcott," the boy laughed, and with a relieved "good-night," he departed, as Westcott was turning toward the telephone-booth.

Half an hour later the attorney was in his own office, boiling water in a tin pail, on top of the little stove, while Barker, warmed and cheered, made great inroads upon the bread and cheese and the tinned meat. Presently Westcott made tea in the pail.

"Seems like old prospecting days, don't it?" he said with ostentatious cheerfulness, as he filled the tin cup. "I dare say you 've had your share of them?"

"Some. . . . A-a-h!" Barker drank, blissfully, of the strong, scalding brew.

"I located a good claim once," he said, setting down the cup. "But it was jumped. All I ever got was—"

He paused, in some embarrassment, and changed the subject. "Great stuff, that tea," he said, and Westcott refilled the tin cup.

"I 've done better for you than I hoped to," he volunteered presently. "I could n't raise the

money in the town—too near pay-day; but I got a pal of mine on the 'phone. He can let me have the cash, and I 'll get it to-morrow. Don't you worry, Barker." He answered the question in the other's eyes, "I 'm looking out for you all right. You don't need to worry."

"I 'm a pretty sick man," Barker answered, his white face flushing. "I know I 'm done for; but I want to die in the open."

"Don't you talk about dying." Westcott went about the place making it secure for the night. "You 'll be snug as can be here," he added, "By seven o'clock to-morrow morning this town 'll be practically empty. All the men 'll be at the mine. Sime 's going down to the plain to meet the stage, and the school-teacher 'll be busy. We 'll get you off in good shape."

He took some papers from the desk and put them in his pocket.

"I would n't show myself, though," he said. "Keep the curtains down, and lay low. Lock the door after me, and take out the key."

At the last words the man's look of anxiety vanished.

"All right," he replied. "I 'll sure lay low. I have n't slept much in a week. I 'll be glad enough to take the chance."

"So long, then," Westcott said, slipping out.

"So long," and the key turned in the lock.

CHAPTER II

HAVING secured the door, Barker took the key from the lock and hung his hat upon the knob.

"Don't want anyone peeking in," he murmured, as he resumed his seat by the fire. He was no longer cold, but there was companionship in its glow.

The meager little office was a palace compared with the cell from which he had escaped, he thought as he looked about him in the dim light from the open door of the stove.

"If he plays me any more tricks—" His mind reverted to Westcott, and the cold sweat stood upon his forehead at the idea of possible treachery.

"Pshaw!" he muttered. "There 's nothing more he can do. He 's done it all. God! To think I swore to kill him at sight, and here I am begging favors of him."

The angry snarl in his voice changed to a cough, and ended in a whimper.

"I could n't do anything else," he pleaded, as

though arguing with someone. "I want to get back east. I want to die in the open. Hell! I was going mad in that hole."

He rested his head between his fists, torturing himself with memories of the days before he crossed the Divide, the youngest chain-man in the surveyors' gang of a projected new railroad. He had come from Iowa, and boy-like he sang the praises of his native state all across the alkali plains, until, in derision, his fellows dubbed him "the Iowa barker."

The name stuck. In Nevada he was plain "Barker." The others seemed to have forgotten his real name, and as Barker, when he left the outfit, he drifted down into Arizona. He blessed the easy transition when the trouble came that fixed the killing of big Dan Lundy on him. He had kept his real name secret through all that came after.

What had it all been about? What was he doing here to-night? Why had n't he killed Westcott, instead of sitting here by his fire?

He passed a wavering hand before his eyes. Oh, yes. Now he remembered. Westcott was going to send him east—to God's country. Meanwhile, he was dead for sleep. He caught himself, as he lurched in his chair, and rising heavily, he threw himself upon the couch.

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It was past noon when he woke. The sun lighted the yellow curtains; the door stood open, and Westcott bent over him, shaking him by the shoulder.

"Barker! Barker!" the attorney called.

"Barker! Wake up! Time to get out of this. I 've got a chance to send you down to the railroad."

By degrees he struggled to consciousness, and sat up. Westcott had brought him a big cup of steaming coffee.

"Drink this," he said, not unkindly.

"My friend came up with the money," he went on, as Barker drank, sitting sidewise on the couch. "He 's going to take you down in his buggy. He 'll fix you up all right."

Barker was still dazed with sleep. His ears rang, and the lawyer's voice sounded strange and far away. The coffee made him feel better. It soothed the cough that had racked him the moment he sat up.

"Now eat some grub," Westcott said.

He had brought food from the hotel. Barker was still too far off to wonder at this. He had no desire for food, but he ate, obediently.

Westcott, meantime, had gone outside. In front of the hotel stood a big, rangy bay horse, hitched to a light road-wagon. Near the outfit lounged a

tall, determined-looking man, who came forward when he saw the attorney.

"I 've got to be getting a move on soon," he said. "It 'll be late night, as 't is, before we get there."

"He 'll be ready in the shake of a horn," the other replied.

"Say, Frank," he continued. "He don't know who you are. I 've let on you 're a friend of mine, going to take him down. Let him think that till you get out of town."

"Must be a dead easy one," the man addressed as Frank said.

"Well, you see," Westcott laughed, nervously, "I doped him pretty well last night—the poor devil coughed so," he added, in explanation, and the deputy sheriff gave a grunt that might mean anything. It brought a flush of embarrassment to Westcott's face.

"Come on," he said, shortly, turning toward his office. The deputy climbed into his buggy and drove after him.

"Got to hurry, Barker," Westcott called, opening the door.

He escorted his charge briskly outside.

"This is Mr. Arnold," he mumbled, beside the wagon. "A friend of mine that 'll see you fixed all right."

The man holding the reins scrutinized Barker closely as the latter climbed up beside him.

"All right," he decided, finally, speaking to Westcott, and handed the attorney a folded paper.

"That 's what you were after," he said, briefly. "So long."

A word to the bay colt and they were swinging down Upper Broadway at a pace that made Barker catch his breath as he noted the narrow road, and the steep cañon-side.

"It 'd sure be a long fall," his companion said, answering his look, "But we ain't goin' to take it. You can bank on the colt. He 's sure-footed as a deer."

"I ain't afraid," Barker responded. The fresh, sweet air was beginning to clear his brain and he sat up straighter, a touch of color coming into his death-like face. The other man avoided his glance, giving all his attention to the colt, who was swiftly putting distance between them and the town. The exigencies of the steep, rough road made such attention necessary and neither man spoke again until they had traversed the narrow pass, and were out of the gulch. A sudden turn of the way brought them among the foothills, the broad, yellow expanse of cactus-dotted plain before them.

"Does n't seem as far as it did when I footed it in last night," Barker said at last, with an attempt

to smile, and Arnold nodded. The bay colt was a good traveler, and they were on the level now, following the road that wound its spiritless, grey way among the cacti. The colt took it in long, free strides, that promised to get them somewhere by daylight.

"Good horse you got there," Barker said, with a country-bred man's interest in animals. "Mighty good shoulders."

"You bet!" was the deputy's hearty response. "Good for all day, too."

"I raised him myself," he went on, "and he 's standard bred, too, Daystar, out'n an Alcantara mare." He spoke with proper pride, as the owner of a good horse may.

"They raise some fine stock back in Iowa," Barker remarked, and his companion's fount of speech seemed suddenly to run dry. Barker waited, expectant, for some little time.

"Where are we going to hit the railroad?" He asked, at last.

"The railroad?" Arnold looked puzzled.

"Westcott said you 'd land me where I could get the train east," the other explained. "He said you had the price of a ticket for me. It 's all on the level, ain't it?" he demanded, his voice going higher.

"Oh— Oh! yes, yes! It 's all fixed. Don't you

worry none." The bronze of the deputy's face crimsoned.

"Don't you worry none," he repeated, with a glance at the sky.

An ominous cloud lowered, overhead. The sun was hidden, and the air had grown chill. A fit of coughing had followed Barker's flash of excitement, and he crouched in his seat, shivering slightly.

"Look here," Arnold exclaimed, "you ain't dressed warm enough. They 's some kind of weather breeding."

He reached beneath the wagon-seat and pulled forth his own coat.

"Put this on," he directed. "I 've got my sweater on, and don't need it."

Barker pushed it back.

"I 'm all right," he said. "You 'll need that yourself."

"You do what I tell you," the deputy insisted. "Put it over your shoulders. The wind 's at your back."

He thrust the garment across his companion's wasted shoulders and Barker drew the sleeves across his chest.

As he did so his hand touched something hard, under one lapel. He glanced down at it, and started.

"What 's that?" he cried, turning the metal badge up for closer inspection.

A groan of horror escaped him as he recognized the object.

He sprang to his feet, his long, gaunt hands reaching for the deputy's throat. Arnold swept him back with one motion of his powerful arm.

"Don't you do anything like that," he said, with rough kindness. "You 'd be just a skeeter if I took hold of you, and I don't want to. Suffering snakes!" he pleaded, "Don't look like that! I 'm sorry, man; by Heaven, I 've hated this job like blue poison, ever since I laid eyes on you."

The words died away in his throat before the dumb misery in the other man's face. The wasted figure was slumped forward in an abandon of despair. All the man's pride and courage died in the face of his fearful disappointment.

"Oh, God! Oh, God!" he moaned. "And I thought I was going to die in the open."

He turned to the deputy, a sudden hope lighting his woe.

"Let me get out," he begged. "Let me get out right here. I can't get anywheres: I 'm bound to die; but it 'll be out in the open. Please let me out."

"I can't." The words came through Arnold's set teeth.

"Why not? I never killed Dan Lundy. Before God, I never laid a finger on him." Barker spoke fast and thick, in his eagerness.

"I went to his shack and found him there, knifed to death. And Jim Texas swore he saw me do it. Swore it, mind you; when Hart Dowling and I both knew Texas had threatened Lundy time and again."

A fit of coughing interrupted him, but he went on as soon as he could, his hoarse voice breaking now and then.

"And Westcott came sneaking 'round to see what there was in it for him. He was just starting in then, and I 'd heard he was a smart fellow. I told him of the fifteen hundred dollars dust I had hid in my shack. He was to find Dowling. Dowling 'd gone up into Wyoming. Westcott was to get him down here as a witness. And the damned coyote was to have my fifteen hundred."

Again the racking cough, and his voice trailed off in a choking struggle for breath. He was shrieking when he continued.

"And Westcott took the money! Took it out of my shack, and never came near me again. Left me to die. They 'd ha' hung me, sure, if some of the jury had n't believed Jim Texas lied."

The deputy's face was twisted with pity and shame; the man was so horribly broken.

"They 's a flask in the pocket o' that coat," he said. "Take a pull; it 'll brace you up."

"I don't want it," Barker snarled. "It chokes me more."

He had drawn the coat about him, the sleeves tied across his chest.

"And Westcott went back on me this time, too." He took up the pitiful tale again. "He could n't be satisfied, the devil, with what he 'd done. He had to do it over. But what for? What for? I say? I never did *him* dirt."

The deputy gave a start of surprise.

"Why Westcott got—" he began, then pity kept him silent. If Barker had not guessed he would not tell him.

"Westcott . . . hell!" He spat savagely out upon the desert, shaking his head with pity, as he glanced again at the huddled figure.

"Westcott 's a damned side-winder," he muttered.

They were descending into an arroyo, once the bed of a creek; dry, now, for more than a year. The road crossed it, here.

"We 're going to get our weather, quick," the deputy said, as he noticed that the bottom of the arroyo held tiny pools of water.

Even as he spoke a little stream came trickling down.

"It 's us for the level! Quick!" he shouted, urging the bay.

In an instant darkness was upon them. A sudden flash of steely blue rent the sky; almost with it a quick roll of thunder was all about them and a bellowing rush of water came tearing along the arroyo.

The bay colt squealed with terror, plunging sidewise, heedless of whip and voice. The deputy tried to turn him back to where the bank sloped, but already they were sweeping along with the torrent.

"A cloud-burst," Arnold shrieked, and with the words he was wrested from his seat.

The shafts of the light vehicle snapped short at the gear. The colt, plunging, open-mouthed, was hurled forward in a fearful somersault, and went under, just as the wagon and its remaining occupant rolled over and over, as a boulder might roll, in the churn of maddened water.

It was far into the night when, amid a matted drift, half way up one bank of the arroyo, something stirred, faintly. Caught in a web of debris, and a tangle of mesquite roots that thrust far out from the soil, a man strove feebly to disentangle his head from a smother of something that en-

wrapped it. When at last he partly succeeded he looked up at the calm stars, lamping the sky in solemn splendor. Below him he could still hear the rush of water, but above all was peaceful.

Long he lay, more dead than alive, trying to remember what had happened. By the bright starlight he managed to make out that the body of the light wagon had caught upon an out-thrust web of mesquite roots. He was lying on his side in the wagon box, one arm thrust, to the shoulder, through something that he could not see. About his neck and head was a tangle of cloth which he made out to be the deputy's coat, and a long thong of leather, probably one of the harness reins. This was wound, as well, about what remained of one of the seat braces.

Slowly, by agonizing degrees, the man began to work himself loose from the tangle. Then he discovered that the thing binding his shoulder was the strap of a horse's nose-bag, and the bag itself. It was caught over a long, splintered fragment of the reach, which had broken through the bottom of the wagon-box. The bag seemed to be about half full of oats.

Inch by inch he cleared himself, and laying hold upon the mesquite roots, rose slowly, until he stood up. Every movement was pain, but he persisted doggedly, climbing little by little up the bank,

clinging now to a root of mesquite, now to a point of rock, pausing for breath, or to ease the strain upon his tortured muscles. At last he grasped the trunk of a mesquite and dragged himself out upon the desert, where he fell helpless upon the sand.

CHAPTER III

THE shadowy bulk of distant mountains changed to pale blue as the purple of night slowly lightened. The stars faded, one by one, and a spectral moon slipped wearily down the sky. Beyond the scant mesquite fringing the arroyo the desert lay still and gray, like a leaden sea.

The man woke, and moved slightly, groaning as his wrenched and stiffened body protested. Consciousness strengthened, and he struggled to his knees to stare about him. The chill of early morning had him by the bones, and he shook in its grip. After a little he got to his feet and tried, painfully, to swing his arms.

Away westward a subtle hint of color crept across the pale sky, heralding a coming radiance in the east; but it brought no sense of comfort.

"There 's no one left alive but me," the man whispered, as his gaze took in the awful solitude. "No one but me, Gabriel Gard!"

The sound of that name, spoken all uncon-

sciously, made him start, and look furtively about. The loneliness of the plain had betrayed his jealously guarded secret. Then his mood changed.

"I 've a right to die with it, at least," he muttered. "They can't steal that from me. Barker 's dead, already. Gabriel Gard goes next. Hear that, Gabriel? You go next. Y-a-a-h. . . . God!"

A sudden agony of pain shook him as he began to cough. Every muscle in his body was sore. Then, as the racking grew less, he stood transfixed, staring across the desert.

A crimson glow from the coming sunrise flushed far across the eastern sky, and coming toward him, touched by its glory, was a figure that his astonished brain sought to define.

It was no mirage. He knew the marks of that supreme cheat of the desert. This was no trick of refraction or of reflection. He saw, as a man sees, this creature silently, steadily drawing near.

It was a strangely familiar shape; vague, uncouth, incredible, it seemed; yet he recognized it. He recognized the slender, shuffling legs, the swinging gait, the mis-shapen body, the ungainly, crooked neck and high held head; but why, in the name of reason, should a camel be coming to him, out of nowhere?

Nearer and nearer the creature drew, the uncouth form now a wonder of azure and crimson,

as the light became stronger, and still the man gazed, his bewildered mind refusing to accept the testimony of his eyes.

He was filled with awe. It was true, then, what old prospectors had lately declared, that this solitary wanderer was still in the desert, sole survivor of the old Jeff Davis caravan.[1] Old man Dickson, and again young Bennett, swore they had seen it. Dickson told, indeed, of having had the creature about his camp for nearly a week.

On came the camel, looking neither to the right nor the left, its shuffling stride getting it over the ground with curious swiftness. When it was very near it stopped, under the mesquites, and seemed to wait for the man to approach. Recovered somewhat from his amazement, Gabriel Gard drew nearer and, reaching out a tentative hand, touched the creature's neck.

The animal neither started nor flinched, but be-

[1] When Jefferson Davis was Secretary of War he imported a caravan of camels into the desert, to carry supplies for the army. The creatures stampeded the army mules, whenever they appeared, and the soldiers took to shooting them, on the sly. In time so many were killed that not enough remained to form a caravan, so the survivors were turned loose in the desert. Here they were hunted by tourists, who shot them for "sport," until it was supposed that all had perished. It is known now, however, that one, at least, survives. This solitary one still wanders about the desert, and the writer knows of more than one prospector who has encountered it, very recently.

gan cropping beans from the mesquite trees, quite as if the man were not there. Gard, noting the action, became aware that he was himself faint with hunger.

On the desert, where he had thrown it in rising, lay the deputy's coat, and tangled with it Gard found his own canteen. He took this as a good omen.

"I may need you, yet," he whispered, as he took it up.

In one pocket of the coat was a nickle watch, made fast by a leather thong, to a buttonhole. Another contained the deputy's pipe, some loose tobacco, and a water-tight box, in which were fourteen matches. Gard counted them, carefully.

He turned to the other side-pocket, with but faint hope that the flask which he had scorned the day before would be in it yet.

It was there, however, and beside it, in a greasy, crushed packet, a big beef sandwich. The deputy, accustomed to provide against long rides in the desert, had secured this before leaving the hotel.

The man ate it eagerly, and took a swallow from the flask. The food, and the fiery liquor, warmed him, and revived his courage.

In the coat's inner pocket were papers, a worn memorandum-book, an envelop covered with figures, another, longer one, containing a docu-

ment. As Gard turned them over a postal-card fell to the desert.

He picked it up. On the back were a picture, and some printing. The man read the latter through before he realized what the card was for. It published his escape from jail, and the fact that five hundred dollars reward was offered for his capture.

Now he remembered the deputy's unfinished sentence, and knew why Westcott had betrayed him.

Westcott had got that reward! He had sold him back to death as he had sold him before. God! Why could he not have had his fingers upon that lying throat just once? He would have found strength for the job that needed doing!

He stretched forth his wasted, jail-bleached hands, and regarded them, snarling. Then he raised them, shaking them at the sky.

"I 'll live to do it yet! Do you hear?" he shrieked, "I say I *will* live!"

He beat the desert air with his clenched fists.

"God—devil—whatever you are that runs this hellish world, you 've got to let me live. I 'll make that infernal side-winder wish he could hide in hell's mouth, before I die!"

The torrent of his rage was stemmed by a vicious attack of that racking cough. It tore his

chest, and flecked his lips with blood. When it was over he lay upon the sand for a long time, sobbing the dry, anguished sobs of a man's helpless woe.

The sun, rising above the distant mountains, shone red upon him. The camel left the mesquite's thin shade for the warmer light and the pad of its soft feet aroused Gard. He must not let the creature get away.

He rose, painfully, and went to it, considering the brute carefully. A plan was dawning in his brain. He took the strap that served him for a belt, and buckled it around the camel's neck. The animal followed him, docile as a sheep, when he led it back to the mesquite. Then he bethought himself of the oats, in the horse's bag, below.

Going to the edge of the arroyo he could see it in the wreck of the road-wagon, and he made his way painfully down to it. As he was clambering back he noticed that the back spring of the light rig still clung to it by a single bolt. A slight wrench brought it away, and he secured it, with a vague feeling that it might prove useful.

The full horror of his position was becoming clear to him. He was alone in the desert, without food or weapons. He put the thought away, summoning all his faculties for the need of the moment.

The camel was indifferent to the oats, turning from them to the mesquite, after a tentative investigation. With his belt and the harness rein, Gard proceeded to fashion a sort of rude hackamore, which he put over the creature's head. The great beast, as soon as it was adjusted, settled itself, as by instinct, in an attitude of waiting, while Gard proceeded to fill his canteen and to gather quantities of mesquite beans, bestowing them in the feed bag, and in the pockets of Arnold's coat.

He threw the coat across the camel's back, the buggy-spring and the bag secured by its knotted sleeves. Then he took the leading strap in his hand, spoke to the animal, and they moved out upon the desert.

Gard had no idea in which direction it was best to go, but he argued that the camel knew the plain, and its fastnesses. For himself, he had but one thought—to hide, to rest, to gather strength for vengeance. At that thought he stifled the cough that rose in his throat.

Once they were started he let the strap hang loose and gradually fell behind. The camel went forward a few paces in the direction ahead of them, but feeling no guidance, gradually deflected its course toward the west. Gard followed every movement eagerly, until presently they were going

forward at a steady pace, as travelers with a definite aim.

The sun was well up now, and its beams warmed the man's chilled, sore body. The desert was no longer gray, but a glowing yellow. Even the air was warm-hued, suffusing the landscape with a roseate loveliness that yet seemed less of life than of death.

Everywhere were the desert growths, travesties of vegetation, twisted, grotesque, ghostly gray and pale green in hues. A profound stillness, insistent, oppressive, was upon everything. The yellow sand, the glowing air, the cloudless dome of the sky, the far-off mountains, all seemed to soak up sound. The world lay hushed in fierce, tense quiet, as though waiting the appearance of some savage portent.

The camel did not hasten. Gard, walking beside it, had a feeling that the creature was very old. Its eyes were bright, its coat silky and fine, but deep under the hair's soft luxuriance the man's fingers felt the skin, wrinkled and folded over shrunken muscles.

But there was neither feebleness nor hesitation in the forward progress of the desert pilot. It moved forward with a sort of inexorableness, its padded feet making no sound on the hard sand, its gaze bent steadily ahead, its inscrutable visage

wearing ever, a look of centuries-old scorn for all things made.

They passed a huge bull-snake sunning upon a rock, and here and there a silent bird flitted to or from its home in some thorn-guarded cholla. Once a coyote tossed lightly across their vision, a blown gray feather along the horizon, but no other signs of animal life stirred the death-like plain.

The sand grew warmer in the sun's rays, till permeating heat radiated from it and hung over it everywhere, a palpable, shimmering mist of lavender and gold, between earth and air. By mid-forenoon the sun's rays were oppressive, and they halted in the shadow of a giant suhuaro.

The camel, when the man released the leading-strap, lowered itself slowly to rest, doubling down its legs like the shutting of a jack-knife, and settling upon the sand with the curious, sighing grunt of old age.

Gard, in the meantime, set about the preparation of a meal. He shelled a handful of tree-beans and crushed them between two stones, mixing them with water from his canteen into a sort of paste, which he ate. The suhuaro's fruit was yet hanging upon its great branches, dried, somewhat, by the autumn sun and wind, but palatable and nutritious still. Gard found a long pole, once part of the frame of another giant cactus, and with this

succeeded in knocking down some of the fig-like growths.

When he had eaten them he stretched himself upon the sand, filled the deputy's pipe, and lighted it with one of the precious matches. The unwonted luxury brought him comfort, and ease of mind. He smoked slowly, making the most of it in delicious relaxation, his head in the shade, his weary, sick body basking in the heat of desert and sunlight.

Lying thus there presently spread out before his eyes the sudden vision of a great, island-dotted sea. The surface of the water dimpled and sparkled in the sun; the islands shone jewel-like with verdure, an exquisite suggestion of rich color was over it all.

His eye was not deceived, though his mind half accepted the vision. He knew that it was a mirage, but he lay for a long time watching its changing beauty, a half-amused sense of superiority to illusion ministering pleasantly to his pride. The scene was so very like what it seemed to be.

Suddenly, from the surface of the sea rose a monstrous thing, huge, formidable, portentous, and endowed with motion. Gard turned upon his side, with a gasp. The mystic sea still wavered in the distance, but the shape was no part of it.

An instant he studied it, then sank back with a

sigh of relief. The apparition, upon scrutiny, had resolved itself into a little wild burro, perhaps a quarter of a mile away, passing across the face of the mirage. It was such a germane little shape, this familiar of the desert, that he was cheered by the sight of it. The next instant he noted a tarantula, hairy, vicious, glaring at him from a tiny eminence of sand.

Acting upon impulse, Gard hurled at it the rounded stone with which he had crushed the mesquite beans. The missile struck the sand close beside the tarantula and the huge spider sprang upon it in a frenzy of stupid ferocity. The man laughed silently, a laugh not good to see.

A shadow floated across the plain, and then another. The man glanced upward, to see three or four great black forms circling against the blue.

"You would, eh?" he shrieked, springing to his feet. "Yah! Not yet, you devils! I 'm not dead yet!"

He shook his fist skyward at the huge, waiting birds.

"I 'm alive yet!" he yelled. "You don't get me yet; not till I 've had *my* meat."

The cough seized him, and ere it let go its hold the disappointed vultures, with never a stroke of their wide wings, faded into the skyey depths.

But Gard had no heart to linger further. The

sight of the desert scavengers had shaken him sorely, he hastened to rouse his strange fellow, and soon the pair were again threading that weary way from nowhere to the unknown.

All day they had moved steadily mountainward, and now they began to draw nearer the range that ever since dawn had reared a jagged line along the horizon. Gard had not known whether they would reach the mountains that day. One does not predicate distances in the desert. They may be long, or short; the lying air gives no clue.

But as the afternoon shadows were turning to mauve and blue, what had for hours looked like sloping foothills, leading gently toward further heights, suddenly reared itself before them in a long stretch of high, perpendicular wall.

Straight toward it the camel went, never pausing or looking around at the man beside him, and when another forward step would have found their progress barred, the creature swerved to the left, to enter a narrow pass that appeared as if by magic in the seemingly unbroken wall.

Now the way wound upward along a dry wash, climbing almost imperceptibly, at first, growing steeper, by degrees, though at no time a sharp ascent. The shadows closed in upon them, and the air grew chill, but still the camel walked on, and

beside him, clinging, now, in his weakness, to the animal's long hair, toiled the man.

More and more often he paused for breath, his lungs tortured by the pace. He was faint with fatigue, chilled by the shadow-cooled air, but a drink from the flask gave him brief strength, and he struggled on.

An hour, and they were well within the mountains. The way wound now among greasewood and scrub oaks, with only here and there a cactus. The chaparral drew dense, and Gard could hear birds calling in its depths.

The trail began to widen, and patches of coarse grasses cropped out, here and there. The altitude was not particularly great, but it was beginning to tell upon the man when his strange guide halted in a little open glade, where the wash ended abruptly.

Night was falling, and Gard could make out very little save that the forest growth closed in the glade on all sides. Overhead he could just get a glimpse of the purpling sky, where the stars were already out. Off at one side he could see these reflected in water, and he could hear, as well, the gentle splash of a stream.

The camel stood beside him, wearily patient until, lifting a hand, he removed its load and slipped the hackamore from its head. Freed, the

creature turned away, and presently Gard heard him drinking, not far off.

He followed the sound until he reached water, and passing beyond the camel, knelt to drink his fill from a clear, cold fountain.

Later he gathered such dry sticks as he could find and kindled a fire, as much for protection as for warmth. He was too weary to think of food, but crouched before the cheering blaze, alternately dozing, and rousing to feed the flame.

As often as he did the latter he could see, in the darkness beyond the blaze, the gleaming eyes of small forest-prowlers, come to stare in wonder at the strange thing by the pool. Nothing molested him, however, and toward dawn he fell into a profound, restful slumber.

CHAPTER IV

THE morning light did not confirm Gard's impression that he was in the deep woods. Beyond the thin region of growth fed by the pool the little valley into which he had been led lay sandy and cactus-grown, like the desert. The stream that should have watered it, that had probably, at some time, made its way down the dry wash which he had traversed, now found some underground outlet, and was swallowed up by the vampire plain below.

Above the glade was a steep, rockbound ravine, down which the stream still flowed. The pool seemed to be its last stand against the desert. Gard, tentatively exploring the lower end of this ravine for fuel, found a few blackberries, drying upon the bushes, and ate them, eagerly, with appetite still unsated by his breakfast of mesquite beans. The mesquite grew here, too; with manzanita and scrub oak, arrow weed, and black willow.

The man's chief sensation was a vague surprise

at finding himself still alive. He was too sick—too weak—after his exertion and his rages of the day before, to consider the problem of keeping himself alive. He was chilled to the marrow, and yearned like a fire-worshipper toward the warmth of his camp-glow. He tended the fire carefully. He dared not let it go out; for that meant the sacrifice of another precious match.

The elemental appetite awoke when, stooping to drink from the pool, he saw fish darting about in its clear depths. He worked with the cunning of a pre-historic man until, by means of the feed-bag, which he emptied of its contents, he succeeded in catching two of these.

A long thorn of palo-verde served him for a knife in dressing them, and he cooked them in the earth, with hot stones, laying each fish between the split halves of broad lobes of the prickly pear. They were insipid, and full of bones, but they served to satisfy his hunger.

He decided to keep a record of the days that he should spend in this place; by sticking palo-verde thorns into an out-reaching branch of willow, near the pool. He would stick in a thorn for each day. He cursed the first one, as he thrust it against the wood; because he felt powerless to do anything else.

Following, half sullenly, a mere human instinct

to be busy about something, he set about making a knife from the smallest plate of the buggy-spring. He heated it in his fire till the paint came off, broke it in two and spent the day working one thin end down to a cutting edge, on a big, rough boulder. By night he had six inches of blade with one rounded, sharp end.

He used this, next day, to cut ocotilla-stalks, to make a bed, scraping away the thorns with sharp stones. He worked all day; less because he wanted a bed than because he dimly realized that sanity lay in occupation. That night he set a snare, and before morning managed to catch a cotton-tail which he dressed and roasted for his breakfast.

He was getting over the feeling of being hunted. They would not search for him now, he reasoned; they must feel satisfied that he had died in the cloud-burst. He bathed in the pool that day, when the sun was high, and set about constructing a fireplace against the big boulder. This would make fire-keeping easier.

The days slipped into weeks. Little by little the man was adapting himself to his environment. He learned to dry the mesquite beans and grind them between stones into a coarse flour. This he made into little cakes, which he baked upon a flat stone before the fire. Later, he turned over a patch of earth, watered it, and sowed it with the oats he

had saved from the storm. Now, however, his food was the mesquite, the prickly pear, the century plant, and the fish and small game that he managed to catch.

As he grew stronger he fashioned himself a bow of oak, shaping and smoothing it with his rough knife, and stringing it with fibres from the century plant. His shafts were those of the desert Indians, the arrow weeds growing close at hand, and he tipped them with the cruel, steel-hard dagger-points of the yucca.

With this primitive weapon he gradually grew skilful; and at last he shot a buck, as the creature came down to the pool one night, to drink. He dried the meat, and used the skin, when he had made it ready, as a covering for his bed.

Twice, during the winter, the camel came back to the pool. The creature went as it came, silent, inscrutable. Whither it went Gard did not know; the pool was evidently one of its ports of call while going to and fro on the mysterious business of being a camel. It accepted the man as a matter of course, and left him, when ready, with the indifference of fate, though Gard could have begged it on bended knees, to remain.

He was horribly lonely, with nothing but his hate, and a sick longing for vengeance upon life, to bear him company. There were days when he

cursed the chance that had kept his worthless hulk alive, while sending Arnold, in all his strength, down to death. He had no doubt but that the deputy had perished. Nothing could ever have come, alive, through the rush of water into which he had been flung.

The weeks became months. His oats were coming up, a little patch of cool green on the yellow sand, and he had occupation to fend the field from the small desert creatures that coveted it. He also worked at times at making various utensils of the red clay that he found in the valley, baking them in a rude kiln of his own fashioning.

He came by degrees to love this work, and took great pleasure in it. He even tried to contrive a potter's wheel, but was balked by lack of material. He had to content himself, therefore, with modeling the clay into such shapes of use and beauty as his untaught hands could achieve. In time he came to ornament his work as well, graving designs on the edges of his plates and bowls. The camel's counterfeit presentment figured on one or two of the larger pieces, and upon the others, as the impulse prompted, he put inscriptions, until the homely articles of his daily use came to be a sort of commentary, seen by no eyes save his own, of his moods, and the longing for their expression.

He wrote thus upon other things as well. Lack-

ing paper or implements charcoal and sharpened sticks became his tools; the rocks and trees; his broad earthen hearth; the plastic clay; even the yellow sand of the desert, his tablets, and little by little all these became eloquent of his lonely thoughts.

He put them down upon whatever served, for the mere comfort of seeing them; scraps of lessons conned in the old brick school-house; sums; fragments of the multiplication table; roughly drawn maps and sketches of boyhood scenes; lines from half-remembered poems and hymns; familiar Bible verses that his mother had taught him. They came back to him bit by bit, in his solitude. And one and all his soul found them camps by the way on its long journey up from despair.

From one of his excursions into the valley he brought home the empty shell of a desert turtle. This he split, and fashioned the upper half into a bowl to contain the palo-verde thorns of his record. They were already crowding the willow branch, and but for them he could scarcely have realized the passage of days.

There were a hundred and forty-seven thorns on the day that he transferred them to the new receptacle. Gard could not be sure that he had one for each day in the desert, but he knew that each one there actually represented a day.

"I 've had every one of that lot," he told himself, talking aloud, as a solitary man gets to do. "Had 'em in the open, in spite of the law sharks."

He still lived from day to day, however, despite his vows, and his threats of vengeance. He had known, when he sought Ashley Westcott, begging the price of a ticket east, that he was a doomed man.

"It 's all borrowed time," he muttered, shaking the turtle-shell.

His face darkened.

" 'T ain't either," he cried. "It 's time won back. They stole it from me down there. They robbed me of three years, the filthy thieves! What 's a hundred and forty-seven days against that?"

He remembered an occasion when to get away from the wood-pile that was his special charge, in his boyhood, he had heaped a scant supply of split wood over a pile of chunks yet untouched by the axe, and exhibiting the result as his finished task had escaped with his fellows upon some expedition of pleasure. He had meant to return in time to complete his work before the cheat should be discovered, but he forgot it.

His father had first thrashed him well for his wickedness, then lectured him tenderly about it. The wicked, he had told him, would not live out

half their days. Gard's laugh as he recalled the words was more nearly a snarl.

"He was a good man all right," he said, "but he did n't know it all; not by an eternal lot."

He tormented himself with other boyish memories: the broad grassy stretches of the prairie came up before him; the woods that neighbored his father's farm; the pleasant fields, and occasional low hills that had seemed to him so high, before he had seen mountains; the swimming-pool where he and the fellows played in summer; the skating-pond where they raced and built forts and fought mimic battles in winter; the red brick school-house at "The Corners"; the white church at "The Centre," where he had gone to Sunday-school; the little shed chamber with its creaking stairs that his mother had climbed, how many cold nights! to see if he were warmly covered. She was gone from earth now, but the old boyhood places were left, and he yearned for them all, with yearning unspeakable.

"I thought I was going to get back to it," he groaned, through his set teeth. "I trusted that poison-snake to help me; God! If I could get these hands on him, just once!"

But the quiet of his hundred and forty-seven days, and the balm of the healing air, had wrought within him more than he knew. His excursions

afield grew longer, day by day, and in the gray of one beautiful morning he started out to explore the mountain.

He had traversed the cañon before now, climbing over rocks, and around mighty boulders washed down by ancient avalanches, or torn from above by titanic storms, until he came to where the mountain stream took a leap of some seventy feet, and the sheer face of the cliff barred his way. This time, however, he followed the cañon's edge, to which the trees clung precariously, sycamores, oaks, and, to his delight, some walnuts. He marked the spot where they grew, as a place to be visited in the nut season.

The morning was far spent when he reached this point, so he lingered to rest, to eat the jerked venison and mesquite bread he had brought with him. Then he resumed his climb until he was well beyond the timber growths and had to fight his way through chaparral.

He crawled among this on hands and knees, now and then, frightening birds, and other small game, from their hiding-places, and at last came out upon the rocky open, and the broad spaces where the large creatures of the mountains make their homes. He noted more than one faint trail leading over the wastes, and now and again he caught sight of deer in the distance.

Higher still he climbed, into the regions of white sunlight, until the cold, pure air of the snowy ranges blew through his hair, and he began to feel the altitude. In spite of this he pressed on, and at last reached a ridge where grew a few scattered heralds of the great pine belt above him. Here, quite unexpectedly, the vast waste of the desert suddenly met his gaze, far, far below.

There was a strange, horrible unreality about it. The far gray plain; the mountain's bare, brown bones; the wind-distorted trees; the solemn, snowy sierras, even the blue arch of the sky, seemed but components of some fearful nightmare.

"I 'm not asleep," he muttered; "and it 's no dream; I 've died, and gone to hell!"

The bitterness of desolation was upon him. His very soul lay bare in the bright, white sunlight of the heights, and he cowered, like a child afraid of the dark.

As he stood thus, from out the silence a soft, clear whistle rose upon the air. It was repeated, then taken up, farther away. The man quivered as though the sound had struck him. Then his tense muscles relaxed; he saw the whistlers to be a covey of quail, moving along the rocks a little below him.

They came nearer, walking in single file, full of curiosity about him, alert, speculative, keeping up

a murmur of little ornithological remarks among themselves, the while. The gentle fearlessness of the small, pretty creatures filled all that grim place with an ineffable grace. A sob strained at the man's throat.

"Just as if they were in a garden!" he whispered.

Long he stood watching the birds, who presently, as if satisfied that no harm dwelt in him, scattered about the rocky waste in search of food. One only remained on watch, guarding the flock from a little eminence where he stood motionless save for his pretty crest, which the wind blew from side to side. Gard watched him, fairly hushing his own breath lest he alarm the small sentinel, who in turn regarded him, with bright, innocent eyes.

"To think of it," the man murmured, "the little, little things, so fearless, up here in this—this—secret—place—of—the—Most—High!"

He stopped, in vague surprise at his own speech. He had not meant to say that, but from some neglected recess of his boyhood's memory the words had sprung, vital with meaning.

"I wish," he finally began, after a long pause, and ceased speaking as a wave of sickening despair swept over his soul. The idleness of the phrase mocked him; the folly of wishing anything, helpless there in the bitterness of desolation, came

home to him with cruel force. Then the ache of his spirit's yearning drew his clenched hands up toward the blue vault.

"I wish," he breathed, his heart pounding, his brain awhirl with a sudden vision of the infinite wonder of things, "I wish that—if there is such a thing as God in the world I might come to know it."

Slowly his hands came down to his sides. The sentinel of the rocks gave a soft little call of reassurance to the flock, which had halted, observant of the gesture, and the birds resumed their feeding. Gard turned for another look at the snowy ramparts on high; at the vast plain below. All their horror was gone, for him, and he began the descent of the mountain with the peaceful visage of one who has been in a good place.

FAR into the night he awoke with the feeling of something stirring near him. In the dim firelight he could make out a shadowy figure on the hearth, and he sprang up in haste. A second glance, however, as he sat upon his ocotilla bed, showed him that there was no harm in the visitor shivering there by the coals.

It was a burro, and the listless pose, the drooping ears and the trembling knees proclaimed a sick burro. It was too miserable even to move,

when Gard threw an armful of brush on the fire and speedily had a blaze by which he could see the intruder plainly. His first glance revealed a jagged, dreadful sore on the shoulder next to the light.

Speaking very gently, he drew nearer to the burro and though the little creature trembled violently, it let him bend down and examine the wound.

A great spike of the long, tough crucifixion-thorn had somehow become imbedded in the flesh, and the whole surface of the shoulder was swollen and inflamed. Gard made a little sound of pity in his throat, and the burro, turning, tried to lick the sore.

"No use to do that yet, Jinny," the man said. "That thorn 's got to come out first."

The burro had probably never before been touched by hands; but not for nothing was Jinny wide between the ears. She scrutinized her would-be helper closely, for a moment, through her long lashes, and drooped her wise-looking little gray head still lower. Gard threw another armful of light stuff on the fire and when the blaze was brightest attacked the thorn, using one of his sharp arrows as a probe.

Once or twice the creature flinched. Once she snapped her strong teeth at the hurting side; but

Gard worked steadily and quickly, and presently had the offender out.

"Look a' that, Jinny," he cried, triumphantly. It was a joy to hear himself speaking to something alive.

"Look a' that!" he repeated, "Ain't you glad you found the doctor in?"

He dipped warm water from an earthen pot in the ashes, and washed the wound carefully, talking all the while to the still trembling patient, silently regarding him. When the place was quite clean he made a poultice of prickly pear and bound it on with a strip of deer-skin.

"Lucky I shot another buck, Jinny," he said, "or you would n't have that nice bandage."

The little burro expressed no thanks; only stared solemnly at the fire. Gard strode out into the darkness and pulled, recklessly, an armful of his precious, growing oats. He threw the green stuff down before her and she sniffed it curiously before she began, ravenously, to eat it.

"Hungry, were n't you?" the man said, sympathetically. "Been too sick to eat. Well, well, make yourself at home."

He threw a big stick upon the fire and went back to his bed, leaving the burro chewing, meditatively, before the blaze.

He was just falling asleep when he felt some-

thing warm fumbling about him, and he awoke with a start, and an exclamation that quickly turned to something very like a laugh. The grateful little burro was licking his hands.

"Why, Jinny!" he cried, sitting up. "Well, well, Jinny! Well, I 'll be jiggered!"

He slipped an arm over the rough little neck and the two watched the fire till dawn.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

CHAPTER V

THE burro got well and throve. Gard devoted the period of her convalescence to teaching her the essential arts of the higher companionship. Her first lesson in burden-bearing was to bring ocotilla-stalks from the valley. With these she saw the oat patch fenced in from her own depredations, and lifted up her voice in remonstrance when she found herself barred out of that delectable ground. Gard explained the matter to her.

"This is a world, Jinny," he said, "where we have to wait till the things we want are ripe. I 'm waiting myself, Jinny, for my time to come. It will, some day, ah—some day!"

He was thinking of Westcott, but the curses that he was wont to call upon his enemy's head died upon his lips. It was not that his hatred had died, but there seemed, somehow, to be other things than hate, even in his tiny world.

He hunted up a palo-verde thorn with which to mark his day, Jinny keeping him company. He

still kept the record on the willow branch, removing the thorns and putting them away whenever he had ten. There were that number this morning.

Spring was well advanced, now. The air was soft, and sweet with the scent of manzanita in the chaparral. For days past hundreds of wild bees had been hovering about the pool, and the underbrush. Gard had a line on them, and thought he knew where the bee-tree was located. His oats were nearly ready for harvest; a century-plant in the valley was sending up a long bloom-stalk, and the sound of water leaping down the cañon mingled with the voices of birds in the chaparral.

As Gard put back his shell, with its contents of thorns and turned toward the pool sudden recognition came to him of a heretofore unsuspected truth.

"By the great face of clay, Jinny," he said, drawing a long breath, "We 're not so bad off, after all!"

Again his eyes ranged the green circle of the glade; at the farther side, where the growth was sparse, he could see the valley with its yellow sands and rose-tinted air. The bright red of blossoming cacti made vivid patches here and there in the waste; even the great barren felt the touch of spring.

"God may have forgot this country," the man

said, after a long silence, "But He sure made it, if He made the rest. It 's got the same brand, when you come to see it.

"I guess, Jinny," he continued, still gazing afar, "that the best of one thing 's about as good as the best of another. What do you think about it?"

As Jinny did not commit herself he sat down upon a rock and reached out to scratch the shaggy gray head.

"If I 'd got back to Iowa when I wanted to," he went on, "I 'd most likely be dead by now."

Jinny's head drooped till her nose rested upon his knee, and she nodded off to sleep. Gard let her stay and sat looking off across the valley, his mind full of new emotion.

"A man might think," he slowly mused, considering the mystery of his coming to this place, "that 't was what old Deacon Stebbins used to call a 'leading'."

He turned the thought over in his mind.

"Why not?" he asked.

His eyes rested upon one toil hardened hand as it lay upon Jinny's back. He held it up, surveying it curiously.

"Rather different, from what it was," he thought, clenching it into a great fist. "Yah—" with sudden anger, "It 'll be different for Ashley Westcott if ever he comes to feel it."

His mind dwelt upon that possibility.

"If ever I do get hold of him," he muttered, and then paused, as half-forgotten memories of that faithful teacher came flocking to the front.

"The deacon 'd be down on that idea," he reflected. "Wonder how he 'd work his pet hobby o' forgiveness here. He could n't judge of everything," his thought still ran on. "The deacon he never got so near Hell as Arizona. If he had he 'd have found it a place his God of Mercy had n't got on His map."

He put Jinny aside and set to work fashioning himself a new cup. He had broken his only one the night before.

"I guess I was wrong about that last notion." His brain took up the question again as he shaped the red clay. "I guess He must have this place on the map. Looks like His mercy 'd been trailing me here, so to speak."

He paused to contemplate the proportions of his new cup, staring, half startled, at its rounded surface. Phrases from the old psalm that mothers love to teach were beating upon his brain.

"Goodness and mercy," he murmured, feeling his stumbling way among the words, "goodness and mercy shall follow me."

The familiar glade grew new and strange to his sight, as though he saw it for the first time.

"Why!" he cried, a sudden light dawning, "Is *that* what it means?"

Almost mechanically he went on patting and pressing the clay.

"I guess it does mean that," whispered he at last, pinching up a handle for his cup. "I did n't think I 'd be alive till now when I came up here. I 've wanted to die, many a time; but I 'm glad, now, I did n't. I may get out of here some day, too. I may live to get Westcott yet!"

" 'Goodness and mercy shall follow me.' " Was that so he could live to see his dream of vengeance fulfilled?

Ah! He could not give that up! It could never mean that he must give that up! Else where were the good of remaining alive?

No; no; it did not mean that! Even the old deacon would n't have thought he must forgive what he, Gabriel Gard, had borne.

"Oh, Lord," Gard said aloud, "It can't mean that! It ain't in human nature that it should mean that!"

The cup in his hand was crushed again to formless clay. He tore and kneaded it viciously, great drops of sweat beading his forehead.

"It 's against human nature," he groaned as he sought to bring the plastic stuff again into shape. "I can't do it! But—" The words rose to an

agonized wail as his spirit recognized the inexorableness of this demand upon its powers—"I 've got to. I 've got to!"

His mind went back to the day upon the mountain-ridge, when he had seen the quail, and he remembered his wish, the wish that had been almost a prayer; remembered it with a hushed feeling of awe.

"If I 'd sensed it," he said in a voice tense with his soul's pain, "If I 'd sensed that this is what comes of knowing there 's a God, I guess I would n't have dared wish that."

Hour after hour the battle was fought over the wet, red clay, and the day was far spent before the cup was ready for the kiln. When at last Gard, weary, but at peace, brought it for the final perfecting of the fire, he paused, ere he thrust it in, to read once more the rude letters graven deep in its fabric.

THE CUP OF FORGIVENESS

"We 'll see how it comes out," he muttered, grimly, but already the hope grew in his heart that the clay would stand the test.

THROUGHOUT the spring Gard busied himself with building a cabin. He needed a place in which to

keep his stores from prowling creatures. A brown bear had secured a good part of the last deer he had shot—secured it while it was drying on branches of the mesquite—and the birds and small beasts of the chaparral took toll of all his scanty supplies. Then, too, he took a man's delight in construction, and the building of the cabin had come to be a labor of love, as well as of necessity.

The walls of the structure were of desert stones laid up in mud. For the roof he brought skeleton stalks of suhuaro. Later he meant to plaster these with adobe, into which he should work straw, and the coarse gramma grass of the region.

He worked upon the building at odd times, as the summer went on, taking increasing joy in bringing it to completeness. He mascerated prickly-pear cactus in water and soaked the earthen floor with the resulting liquor, pounding it down afterwards until it was hard and smooth as cement. He made his door of ocotilla-stalks laid side by side and woven with willow-withes. In the same way he contrived a shutter for the window, and he constructed a second, smaller, fireplace, within the cabin.

"When we have distinguished visitors, Jinny," he told the little burro, "We 'll kindle a fire for them here."

He still used the larger hearth outside. He had learned, after many trials, to kindle a fire with the

aid of flint and steel, and was no longer dependent upon matches.

When his shelter was complete he contrived furniture for it, for the sheer pleasure of construction. Lacking boards, or the means to manufacture them, he wove his table-top of arrow-weed and tough grasses from the cañon. It was beginning to be a source of delight to him to contrive solutions for each new problem of his hard existence.

One night, in the early autumn, Gard was wakened by a fearful crash of thunder. He sprang from his bed, to find Jinny already huddled against him. All about them was the roar of the sudden storm.

The pool had overflowed, and swept across the glade in a broad stream, pouring down the defile in a whelming tide. The heavens seemed to have opened, torrentially; Gard's bed was beaten down, and the fire was flooded. Gard himself was almost thrown to earth by the thrashing rain ere he could reach the cabin, into which he darted, Jinny close at his heels.

The shelter was built against huge boulders, out of the track of the flood from the pool, but the mud and thatch roof leaked like a sieve. It served, however, to break the fierce violence of the storm, and they huddled there miserably till the worst should be over.

The sounds without were like those of a battle: the echoing rattle of thunder down the cañon; the rending of rocks; the crash of falling trees; the screaming of the wind—all mingled in a fierce, wild tumult.

A flash of lightning revealed a great scrub-oak, torn from its anchorage above, crashing down into the glade. The next instant the whole place seemed filled with some giant thing that raged and snarled, hurling itself from side to side in mighty struggle.

It dashed against the fireplace, flinging the great stones of it in every direction, and fell upon the uprooted tree in a frenzy of titanic rage.

Its horrible roaring shook the cabin, and Jinny, pressing against Gard, was almost beside herself with terror. Gard himself, peering through the window of the hut, could make out nothing definite, until another flash suddenly showed him a huge grizzly, reared upon its hind legs, striking madly at the empty air.

The storm had moderated, now, and he could hear, as he strained to listen, the fearful snarls of the bear rising above the roar of the wind. The threshing tumult of its plunging had ceased, however, and even the snarling had grown weaker.

The rain ceased, but the wind still swept the glade, and the pool had become a lake. Gard was

chilled to the bone, but dared not venture without. He had not heard the grizzly for some time, but Jinny still cowered against him, trembling.

At dawn he looked from the window upon a scene of devastation. The ground was strewn with debris. Great boulders had been hurled down by the torrent's force, and beside one ragged block of granite lay the grizzly, terrible, even in death. One side of its savage head was crushed in, and a shoulder shattered.

Jinny was still too terrified to venture outside the hut, but Gard went out and set to work to restore some semblance of order about the place.

The roof of the shack was a wreck. Gard had to clear away a part of it that had fallen, before he could find his precious matches and get a fire. There were nine of the matches left, and it took two to start a blaze with the soaked wood. He breakfasted upon dried venison, which he shared with Jinny, grown catholic in her tastes, and then set about skinning and dressing the bear.

He stretched and scraped the great hide, and pinned it out upon the earth, (it meant warmth and comfort to him through the coming winter nights,) and cut the meat into long strips, to dry. It would be a welcome change, later, from venison and rabbit.

It was noon before his toil was completed and

the traces of it so far removed as to ease Jinny's perturbation. He was obliged to bathe in the enlarged pool before she seemed comfortable when near him.

As he dressed, after his ablutions, his eye caught a broken bit of rock lying at the water's edge. He picked it up, a curious tightening in his throat.

There is something about the glitter of a streak of yellow in a bit of rock that would set the heart of the last man on the last unsubmerged point of earth to beating fast. The piece of float was freshly severed and the flecks of yellow showed plainly in its split surface. Gard scrutinized the mud round about, and beyond the pool found another bit of float.

Forgetful of all else, he sprang up the cañon. It, too, was full of debris, witness to the mighty power of the storm. He hardly knew the place as he climbed along, making a new way for himself; for the swollen stream roared wildly where but the day before he had been able to walk.

The cañon walls on either side were wrought and twisted by the action of ancient heat, scarred and eroded by the force of ancient waters, but they revealed no fresh break, though he scanned them eagerly.

He kept on, however; for a quarter of a mile above the pool another bit of float pointed the

way. It was a savage climb, but mounting, circling and crawling past heaped up boulders and masses of earth, he presently found progress checked by a landslip, beneath which the rushing water was already cutting a channel.

Here lay the vein, uncovered, the gleaming particles in the cloven rock making the man's breath come thick as he studied them.

There was no doubt about it: he had discovered pay rock of the richest sort. How rich it was he had no means of determining, nor did he then dream; but he knew that right in sight was more gold than he should be able to get out with any tool at his command, and hope was already high within him.

He stooped and picked up small fragments of broken rock that lay among the debris. How heavy they were! What power they represented! What dreams might come true, by the aid of their yellow shine!

Here was his ticket east. Here was a ticket to the uttermost parts of the earth. With it he could go away, stand rehabilitated among his fellows. Golden vistas of power and pleasure spread out before him as he stood gazing long at the cleft, yellow-flecked rock before him.

"Whoever runs this outfit," he whispered, "has remembered it, after all."

It was long before he could bring himself back to reality. Only the gathering autumn gloom, coming early, in the cañon's depth, finally recalled him. He began turning over in his mind the means he must contrive with which to meet this emergency. If only he had the tools!

"It 's up to me to make some," he said aloud, and at the words he suddenly turned and looked back at the golden vein he was leaving.

"You 're great!" he shouted; "You 're bully to have; but you ain't all there is to it!"

He spread out his hard hands. "These that can make the things to get you out with are better yet," he said, speaking more slowly.

For he suddenly remembered the pit from which he was digged, and the man's heart yearned to his fire beside the clean pool, and for the life there that he had wrested from nothing.

CHAPTER VI

GARD and Jinny were on an expedition after salt. The instinct hidden in the gray little hide was so much more useful in the case than the thinking machinery beneath the man's thatch of hair, that she had long ago led him to a desert supply of this commodity, which he had longed for, without being able to supply his need.

He was utilizing the trip in an effort to make Jinny bridlewise, a proceeding which filled her with great displeasure. She was a sturdy little brute, of good size for a wild burro, and she bore his weight without apparent effort; but she had a fondness for choosing her own direction, and objected, strongly, to the guiding rein. She protested, now, raising her voice, after the manner of her kind, when Gard, from her back, essayed to turn her at his will.

"Jinny! Jinny!" he remonstrated; "Not for the world would I call you anything but a lady; but I can't be so mistaken, Jinny! You 're not a nightingale!"

Jinny was persistent, however, in her determination to travel eastward, and although her companion, had he been allowed a preference, would have elected to go toward the west, he had learned enough about his small gray friend to be willing to trust her judgment in the matter.

"Though I must say, Jinny," he remarked, reproachfully, as he gave her her head, "that it 's spoiling the making of a good saddle-burro."

It was well toward the end of Gard's second year in the desert. In all this time he had but once encountered his own kind.

On that occasion, too, he had been after salt, and he had met a desert Indian afar on the plain. They had talked together, after a fashion, by the aid of signs, and Gard had learned that the railroad lay three days distant, toward the northwest. This was a matter about which he had often speculated, and he was glad of the information. Because of it, he proffered the Indian the deputy's pipe, which he had with him, happening, on that day, to be wearing Arnold's coat. The brave took it, the gift only serving to strengthen his already formed opinion that the gaunt white man with the great beard was loco.

It was a year since the discovery in the cañon. Gard had worked the vein, in a primitive way, making for the purpose a rough mattock, from his

useful wagon-spring. It was by far the best tool he had constructed, and he regarded it with even more pride and pleasure than he took in the two heavy little buckskin bags for which he had made a hiding place in the chimney of the rehabilitated cabin.

He had arrived in these days at a strange content. He loved the vast reaches of his large place; the problems of his elemental environment. The luminous blue sky, the colorful air, the immensity of the waste plain, gave him pleasure. Even the weird desert-growths no longer oppressed him.

"After all, Jinny," he said, as they threaded their way gingerly past a great patch of cholla, with its vicious, hooked spines, "there 's as much life here as there is death. I never sensed it before; but everything 's got a claw to hang onto life with."

The thought of returning to civilization was put away with ever increasing ease. He had not abandoned the idea, but it came as a more and more remote possibility. Even his dream of vengeance had long been put aside. He had learned the futility of hate in the nights when he watched the great stars wheel by, marking the march of the year.

"There 's nothing in it," he had finally said to himself.

"It ain't a man's job to be staking out claims in hell for another fellow."

If Jinny, who heard this, did not understand, she at least offered no contradiction, being by that much wiser than many of her kind on a higher plane.

The desert stretched away before Gard, vast, silent, untamed, at this moment a thing of gold and flame, touched, far in the distance, by great cloud-shadows, that sent the man's gaze from the fierce plain to the wide blue overhead. But not a cloud was in sight and he realized that, probably for the hundredth time, he had been deceived by patches of lava cropping up among the red and yellow sands.

Something that was not a cloud arrested his attention. Far in the sky half a dozen great black birds flew, now high, now lower, but circling always above one spot. Gard watched them with an understanding eye.

"Jinny," he said, "There 's something dying, over there. You and I 'd better go see what it is."

He had dismounted some time since, and was walking beside the burro. Now he started forward at a faster pace. It might be only a hurt coyote that the hideous birds waited for, but it *might* be a man! The thought quickened his steps still more, till Jinny had to trot, to keep pace with him.

Once an aerial scavenger swooped lower than any other had yet done, and at the sight the man broke into a run. The birds still kept off, however. Whatever it was, lying out there, somewhere, it was yet alive.

They were traveling along the edge of a deep barranca that yawned in the desert, and presently Gard caught sight of a dark object lying on the sand, at the bottom of the fissure. It was a man. The banks of the ditch sloped just there. Evidently he had attempted to cross, and had been caught in quicksand.

He was lying on his back, his arms outstretched, his feet wide apart, a curious rigidity about his whole figure. Gard's long stride left Jinny far behind as he ran.

"Hold on!" he shouted. "Somebody 's coming!"

There was no response from the man. He lay as one dead, save for the occasional lifting now of one arm, now of the other.

Down the sloping bank Gard ran, to the very edge of the shifting sand. Here he stopped, and began cautiously to tread, his feet side by side, stamping, stamping, moving forward half an inch at a time, but never ceasing to tread. He was harried by the need of haste, but he made sure of his progress as he went, knowing that the sand must be solidly packed, every inch of the way.

From time to time he spoke to the man, and at last got a mumbled word or two from the swollen lips. The need of haste was increasing every second, and Gard worked breathlessly, now, till at last he could touch his fellow, lying there.

Still marking time with his feet upon the sand, he slipped from his own waist the riata he always carried when he came down to the plain. He had made it himself of finely braided hide, suppled and wrought with faithful care, and he knew its strength. Working fast, he raised the man's shoulders, ever so little, and slipped the rope beneath his arms. He knotted it into a loop and adjusted it over his own shoulders. Then, getting a strong hold with his hands under the man's arms, he straightened up.

The sand slipped, and ran, gurgling horribly, sucking, sucking, loth to lose its victim, but the pull of rope and hands together counted. Gard took a backward step and gained a few precarious inches.

A second time he stooped, and straightened, repeating the performance again and again, until the man lay upon the trampled path. Gard could use his strength to better advantage now, and half lifting the dead weight, he drew it back to the edge of the sand.

The man was barely conscious, but Gard laid

him on the sloping bank and gave him a little water from his canteen.

It revived him somewhat, and was repeated, after a moment. He was able to mumble now, begging for more, which Gard gave him as fast as he dared, till at last the poor fellow got to his hands and knees, and was able, with help, to crawl slowly up to the plain.

Here, Gard soaked a little cake of oat flour in water, and fed him like a baby, but it was an hour before he was able, after many attempts, to get the man upon Jinny's back.

He could not sit erect, but Gard walked beside him, supporting him, and the little cavalcade set out for home. The rescued man was half delirious, and muttered continually, between his pleadings for water, of the heat; of thirst, and of the vultures. Gard could not make out what particular disaster had befallen him, but the empty canteen slung at his back, and the absence of anything like food, or of an outfit, was eloquent witness that a desert tragedy had been averted.

Before they had gone far up the trail to the glade the delirious muttering ceased; the man swayed toward his rescuer until his head rested upon the latter's shoulder, and so they went on. Whether he was asleep, or in a faint, Gard could not tell.

"He 's had a tough pull, that 's certain, Jinny," he said, giving the burro an encouraging pat.

Could Jinny have spoken she might have said that she was herself having a hard pull. She had often carried Gard, on the plain, but this dead weight, on an up-grade, was a brand-new surprise for her. She wagged her solemn little head sorrowfully as she plodded on, and not even the oat cake that Gard reached forth to her seemed to impart any charm to life as she then saw it.

They reached the glade at last, and Gard got the stranger upon his own bed, covering him with the great bear-skin robe. He brought him nearly all that was left of the deputy's whiskey, cherished carefully all these months, and set to preparing a meal.

He kicked aside the smoldering ashes of a nearly burned out fire on the hard earth, and with a few thrusts of a broad, flat stick, disclosed the earthen jar of mesquite beans that he had left to cook in his absence. Simmering with the beans were the marrowbone of a deer and the carcass of a rabbit caught that morning. The savory whiffs from the steaming mess made the exhausted man on the bed turn his face to the fire.

"How in all git out," he began, feebly, and stared in amazement; for Gard had flanked the bean-pot with another, taken from the fire he had

quickly kindled by transferring the still smoldering sticks from the bake-fire to the fireplace. The visitor sniffed at this second pot, incredulously.

"Where 'd you git coffee?" he demanded.

"Sweet acorns," Gard explained, briefly. He was tasting the full joy of hospitality as he brought wild honey, and more oat cakes, from the shack.

The stranger reached eager hands toward the acorn coffee.

"Gimme some—hot!" he pleaded.

Gard filled a crooked earthen bowl with it and brought it to him, steaming. He drained it, almost savagely, handing the bowl back with a sigh of satisfaction that left nothing for words to express.

"Partner," he said, his little close-set eyes taking in the scene, wonderingly, "This is sure a great layout. How 'd ye find the place, an' what 's yer game?"

"I got up here by chance," Gard said, evasively. "I liked the spot, and so I 've stayed along. My name 's Gard," he added, remembering that he had not told it.

"Mine 's Thad Broome," the other replied, "an' I 'm runnin' the hell of a streak o' luck."

Gard had moved his little table up beside his guest, and now he proceeded to serve his meal on flat, clay plates of rather nondescript shape. He had a fork and a spoon, rudely fashioned of wood, and these he allotted to the stranger.

"Did you make everything ye 've got?" Broome demanded, examining them curiously.

"Very nearly," was the reply, and the newcomer began to eat, eagerly. At intervals, during the meal, he told his story.

"I 'm a cow-man myself," he said, flinging a bone out across the glade, "An' if ever I git back on the range ye kin fry me in skunk ile first time ye ketch me off it."

He took another great draught of the acorn coffee, swearing, savagely, as he set the bowl down.

"Seems like I 'd never git the taste o' the desert out'n my mouth again," he muttered.

"I was with the 'K bar C' outfit," he went on, "Up Tusayan way. Know it?"

Gard shook his head.

"Then ye 're that much better off," Broome said, gloomily. "The grub was fierce; they was a foreman that was seven hull devils all rolled in one, an' a range that 'd drive ye crazy to ride. I was mighty sick of it, a while along, an' I met up with a cuss one day that 'd bin out prospectin', an' struck it rich. So, bein' a blame fool, I got the fever."

He paused to watch his host, who was gathering the remains of the meal and putting things shipshape with a certain fine neatness that had become the habit of Gard's solitude.

"D' ye allus put on as much dog as that?" he asked.

"As much as what?"

"Cleanin' camp like an old maid school-ma'am," was the reply. "Jus' you alone: wha 'd ye bother for?"

"It had to be that, or to go on all fours." Gard offered no further explanation. Thad Broome's type was familiar enough; he had foregathered with it by many a camp fire. He had saved this man from a horrible death, and the fellow was his guest; yet he realized, with a feeling of shamed hospitality, that Broome's presence was irksome.

"Been here long?" the latter asked.

"Longer than it has seemed, maybe," laughed Gard.

"There 's a difference in things," he added, lightly. "I guess, now, the time you were down in the quicksand seemed longer than it really was?"

"Hell, yes!" Broome was launched again on the stream of his troubles. He resumed the narrative, sprinkling it liberally with oaths. He had started out with a full equipment and a good bronco, and the creature had "died on him," a week before, in the desert.

"You should have had a burro," Gard said.

"So they said. But I stuck to the idee of a bronc. I ain't no walkist."

"He did n't last but three weeks," he added, "an' when he croaked the damned buzzards was on 'im before I got out o' sight."

"Where were you going when you struck the quicksand?" the other asked.

"Tryin' to strike the railroad, afoot," was the reply. "It 's me fer ridin' when I can. I said I wan't no walkist. I got turned 'round. I kep' lightin' load, an' my grub gin out. Then I run out o' water." He gave a shuddering gulp, and continued:

"I run round a lot, lookin' fer 't, till I got in the quicksand. That was just before you hollered, I guess. But them buzzards was Johnny on the spot the minute I was down. I most went mad with 'em."

"Did n't you have a gun?" Gard asked. "Why did n't you fire it?"

"Gun? You bet yer life I had a gun. I fired all my am-nition an' then I fergit what. I guess I threw the damned thing away. I got dotty, havin' no water."

"And there was good water within twenty feet of you," Gard said, musingly.

"How 's that?" Broome's tone was incredulous.

"Why did n't you tap the nigger-head there by the barranca?" his companion asked.

"What—the big cactus like a green punkin? What for?" Broome demanded, and Gard ex-

plained the nature of the bisnaga. If he had cut off the top he would probably have found a quart or two of water. Broome listened with curious intentness, and when the other had finished, broke into a torrent of execration.

He cursed the desert in its nearness and its remoteness, inclusively and particularly, for several moments, until presently words seemed to fail him, and the torrent of his oaths dribbled to an intermittent trickle.

When he finally paused for breath Gard sat as though he had not heard, staring across the glade at the fire, but Jinny, at his side, seemed all attention, her long ears pricked forward, her sagacious little visage turned full upon the stranger. There was something disconcerting in the attitude of the two, and Broome felt it, without comprehending it. His voice trailed off weakly.

"Mebby ye don't like my remarks," he said, lamely, "I notice ye don't cuss none yerself?"

"Don't I?" Gard asked the question in all simplicity. "I did n't know it."

Broome stared, uneasily, until the other was constrained to take notice.

"I guess I do," he laughed, half apologetically. "I guess I swear as much as anybody, when I feel so," he added, "but I don't feel so much—not nowadays."

"Ye kin jus' bet yer life," blustered Broome, with a show of being at ease, "that if ye 'd bin through what I have ye 'd be ready to cuss the hull blamed outfit."

He laughed loudly, as he spoke, but Gard was replenishing the fire, and made no reply.

Long hours after Broome was sleeping, exhausted, his host sat before the glowing embers. The day's experiences had brought much to consider.

For one thing, it was certain that the time had arrived when he must return to civilization. He could not keep Broome with him, even if the latter wished to stay. He saw endless possibilities of pain and trouble in such a partnership. And since he could not keep him, he must himself go before Broome had a chance to make any explorations. His heart sank at the prospect.

"It 's been mighty peaceful here, Jinny," he whispered to his faithful little comrade, who dozed beside him in the firelight. "We 'll sure miss it."

Jinny shifted her weight in her sleep, and her head drooped lower.

"One thing, old girl," Gard said, regarding her, whimsically, "You don't have to think about it. A man 's different; he knows when he 's well off, and hates to leave it."

He glanced about him. The firelight touched

fitfully the encircling trees, the great rocks, the open door of the shack where Broome lay asleep, the gleaming pool. Above in the violet depths, blazed the dipper; how many times he had watched it patrol the sky!

"I hate to go," he whispered, again, "I hate to go, Jinny; but good as 't is, I know it ain't really life. A man belongs with men. They may be good or they may be bad; but a man 's got to take 'em as he meets up with 'em. He can't be a real man forever, just by himself."

CHAPTER VII

THE first touch of dawn saw Gard awake and stirring. He went softly about the glade, feeding Jinny in her little corral off at one side, and preparing his own breakfast. The meal finished, he left food where his guest could find it, and made his way up the cañon. He had settled in his own mind that if Broome was able to travel they should leave the glade on the following day; but there was first something that he must do.

The forenoon was well advanced when Broome stirred, opened his eyes and sat up with a start. He was a moment or two realizing his surroundings and recalling the events that had brought him to this place.

He sat staring at the cabin; at the rough mud-and-stone walls; the primitive fireplace; the rude furnishings, and finally summed up his impressions in a phrase:

"Hell! What a layout!"

Then, remembering Gard's probable proximity, he went heavily to the door.

There was no one in sight. In the big outer fireplace an "Indian" fire smoldered, guarded on one side by the earthen coffee-pot, on the other by the big kettle of beans. On the table were a bowl and a plate; the former upside down over some cakes of oat bread. Broome welcomed the sight, for he was hungry.

"Wonder where the *patron* got to so early," he muttered as he fell upon the food.

He ate swinishly, standing before the fire, and had nearly completed his meal when he caught sight of the inscription Gard had put upon the cup from which he was drinking. His little shifty eyes studied it curiously as he turned the cup about.

"What in tunk is that for?" he muttered, perplexed, and when he had managed to decipher the words he nearly dropped the little vessel in his surprise.

"T-h-e c-u-p o-f f-o-r-g-i-v-e-n-e-s-s," he spelled again, holding the cup up to the light and feeling the sunken letters with one hard finger. "Rummy kind o' cup that 'd be."

He stooped to refill it with "coffee" from the blackened pot in the embers and, as he straightened up, his eye met another inscription, on a broad stone beside the door of the cabin. He read it aloud, laboriously:

"Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee."

" 'Peace'—'peace.' " Broome looked about him, half dazed, groping in the void of his own spiritual habitation for an explanation of what he saw.

"There 's sure peace good an' plenty in these diggings," he muttered, "if that 's what a man 's aimin' to locate; peace enough to drive him loco. Guess that 's what ails him. He must be a jumpin' luny to go scratchin' round like this. . . . There 's another one!"

He espied it on the wall over the pallet where he had slept.

"I will both lay me down in peace and sleep; for Thou Lord only, makest me dwell in safety."

Gard had written that the day after the night of terror when storm had devastated the glade; written it remembering how his mother had taught it to him, an imaginative little chap, afraid of the dark. He had been saying his prayers one night, beside his cot in the shed-chamber, when he became afraid the SOMETHING was coming through the gloom to grab him from behind as he knelt. His mother, coming to tuck him up, found him cowering under the blankets and winning from him the secret of his fright, sat down beside him and taught him the beautiful verse. Broome, reading it now, experienced a feeling of dread.

"Peace again," he growled, "I hope he gets peace enough with all his bug-house slate-writing. The feller 's hell on religion; should n't wonder if he was a preacher."

He turned away with an awed shiver.

"Gosh!" he ejaculated, "I 'm glad I did n't see that over my head last night. I could n't a' slept a wink."

He went outside again to fill and drink another cup of acorn-coffee, and when his bodily hunger was satisfied left the debris of his meal on the hearth and wandered about the glade, seeking gratification of his objective curiosity.

"Why!" he exclaimed, when he discovered Jinny, in the corral, "The *patron* can't be far off: he 's left the burro!"

He surveyed Jinny thoughtfully, as she stood at the far side of the corral. Then he wandered over to Gard's rude pottery-factory.

"I 'd like to know what the cuss is doin' here," he thought. "He 's made his outfit from the ground up."

He was struck by that as he continued his roving scrutiny. Gard's bow and arrows fairly frightened him.

"That fellow 's clean dotty," he muttered. "What in thunder kin a live man do with that?"

Presently he found the first knife Gard had

fashioned, laid upon a ledge of the camp fireplace, and turned it over like one bewildered.

"Shivering spooks!" he swore, softly; "If this *ain't* an outfit! He don't look like a 'lunger,' " he added, referring again to Gard; "nor this ain't no prospector's layout; nor the cuss don't seem locoed —not altogether. It 's what I thought. He 's some kind of a preacher. He don't cuss none, an' he seemed sorter quiet like last night. He did n't act just like it, though, neither."

Born of desire, another idea assailed him. "Wonder where he keeps his whiskey," he mused. "That was a hell of a good sample he showed last night."

He began to search more systematically, still keeping an alert eye for Gard's possible return.

"They ain't no hiding-place outside," he decided, and turned his attention once more to the cabin. He had no idea what sort of a receptacle to look for, and a scrutiny of the corners revealed nothing. He crossed the room, to the fireplace, and suddenly gave a little start. He had made what promised to be a discovery.

He tiptoed to the door: no one was in sight, but he stepped outside and again made the round of the glade. Coming back, he took the precaution to close the door when he reëntered the hut.

At the fireplace again, he stooped and put both

hands upon a stone half-way up one side of the rude chimney. As he had foreseen, it came away in response to a little lift—Gard's hiding-place for his treasure had been a most casual thing at best—and a recess lay revealed.

Again Broome listened for sounds outside, ere he lifted first one, then the other, of the two buckskin bags that lay before him.

They were not large; but they were very heavy, and a peep into one revealed the yellow gleam that he had expected.

The little eyes glittered, and the man's fingers opened and shut, clawlike, but he closed the bag, tying its buckskin string, and put it back. There were some papers with the bags, but he would look at those later.

He fitted the stone back into place, scrutinizing it keenly afterwards, to be sure that he had left no signs of his meddling.

"The sneakin' cuss!" he snarled, moving back from the chimney. "He 's got a mine up here! That 's what he was so sly about last night. He 's gone there now, an' he thinks he 'll keep me out of it. I 'll bet he 's up there covering his tracks."

He was outside, now, muttering wrathfully. "No ye don't, my smart coyote," he sneered, "Yer kin just bet yer sweet life Thad Broome sits in this game, sure!"

He went the rounds again, scouting eagerly, till his trained plainsman's eyes detected a faint trail leading over the rocks at one side of the stream.

It was but the suggestion of a pathway, trodden by Gard's moccasined feet, but it was enough for the pryer's sharpened senses. A moment later Broome had skirted the pool, and was hot on the scent.

The trail grew clearer as he followed it, and he pressed on, a growing rage in his heart, toward the man who had found a good thing and was keeping him out of it, after all that he had suffered. Curiously enough, it was only his own part in yesterday's adventure that he remembered. Gard's agency in his rescue and present safety was forgotten or ignored.

Half an hour's cautious travel, and his ear caught a sound somewhere beyond. He crept on stealthily from one sheltering boulder to another, keeping carefully out of sight, until at last, clambering upon a shelving rock, he peered down upon Gard at work below him.

The cañon was very deep here, its walls towering, bare and grim, hundreds of feet in air. A great mass of piled-up rock nearly bridged the stream, and Broome could plainly see the nature of the vein that had been laid bare. Its promise fairly made him gasp.

He could see, as well, what Gard was doing.

On the face of the rock, close beside the opening where he had worked the claim, he had scratched his location notice, roughly enough, with his inadequate tools, but in letters perfectly legible, defining clearly the boundaries of his claim as he had staked it out.

Having done this, he had gone over the letters again, with charcoal, until they stared in inerasable distinctness from the rock. Now he stood at a little distance, regarding his finished work.

"The damned, sneakin' swine," muttered the watcher. "I 'll git even with him; he 's staked the mother-lode."

He leaned forward eagerly to watch, as Gard moved toward the opening in the rock. What was he going to do next?

He saw him stoop for something, and crept nearer the edge of the rock, forgetful of concealment. Attracted by some slight sound Gard suddenly glanced up and looked the spy full in the face. In an instant Broome had sprung upon him and was clutching at the mattock which the other had just picked up.

"Think yer goin' ter kill me with that, do yer?" Broome snarled. "I 'll show yer!" He struck at Gard's eyes, at the same time striving to wrench the tool from him.

Half blinded by the onslaught, the other clinched, instinctively, with his foe, and a grim battle began.

Back and forth it raged, across the bit of sandy floor at the base of the rocks, each man striving for possession of the tool.

Broome was powerfully built, and he had rested from the agony of the day before. He was the heavier of the two, and he fought with an insane fury that pressed his antagonist back against the cliff before Gard had well recovered from the shock of his attack.

Fiercely, silently the two struggled until Gard, momentarily securing the mattock, flung it afar upon the sand. Broome gave a shriek of savage rage, and would have sprung for it, but the other man closed upon him and caught him with one powerful arm about the neck, pressing his face earthward.

Desperately Broome grasped the other's body, striving to break that iron hold, but Gard's blood was up, and he "saw red," as his free arm rained blows upon the other's back.

Strain as he would Broome could not break free, nor trip his foe. The fellow seemed made of iron, and the hammering of that fearful fist was driving the breath from his body. He gathered his forces for a last effort, but his breath already came in gasps, and he sank in a heap upon the sand.

Gard hauled him to his feet, fiercely.

"Stand up!" he shouted, as he faced him about.

Broome would have fallen again, but Gard upheld him, forcing him forward over the rocks, back toward camp. Once he turned, as if he would strike, but a glance at that fierce, set face herded him on again, cowed and stumbling.

"What are ye goin' ter do to me?" he demanded, at last, tortured by Gard's silence. There was no reply.

"I 've as good a right in the cañon as you," Broome persisted. He was in that state of hysterical strain that could not refrain from speech.

"I would n't have touched ye if ye had n't come at me with that pick," he lied. Still not a word from Gard, and Broome kept quiet till they reached camp, and Gard produced a rope.

It was the same with which he had dragged the fellow from the sand the day before; the loop that had been about his body was still in one end. The cowman shrieked when he saw it.

"What are ye goin' to do to me?" he screamed. "By God! You tell me! What 's that thing fer?"

He sprang upon Gard again, and was tossed back like a child. A moment later he was lying upon the ground, bound hand and foot, and Gard towered above him.

"What am I going to do with you?" he asked,

in cold scorn; "What would you do to me, if I was where you are?"

Broome glared his hate, and fear. "Yah!" he snarled, "I 'd kill yer. I 'll kill yer yet, if yer don't look out."

For reply the other gathered him up, dragged him into the cabin and threw him upon the bed there. Then he went outside.

Gard was in a state of amazement. He looked at his own brown hands, and rolling up a sleeve of his buckskin shirt gazed upon his own right arm, lean, sinewy, knotted with iron muscles. He contracted, then relaxed it, slowly, and finally struck himself a resounding blow on the chest. Then he laughed, under his breath.

"And all this time," he said, in a sort of wonder, "I 've thought I was a rather sick man."

He walked over to the corral where Jinny's shaggy head showed over the barrier. There was keen joy in his swift stride, and in the new sense of power, and physical well-being, that filled him.

"Jinny," he said, tweaking one of the long ears pricked forward to welcome him, "I guess the right place for me is here in the corral."

He regarded the little burro thoughtfully.

"I hate to break it to you, old girl," he went on, "But you 've got to carry that load of dirt and

poison down to the desert again. It 's the only way."

He turned again and busied himself about the camp, clearing away the debris of Broome's meal, and putting the place to rights. He brought out the largest of his willow baskets, one that he had made to fit Jinny's back, and proceeded to fill it from his food-stores. Broome, within the shack, watched his movements whenever he came within range, but he had learned his lesson, and asked no questions. Later in the day Gard brought him food, and released his hands that he might eat, but neither man spoke, and when Broome had finished eating his captor bound him again.

Dusk was falling when Gard next came into the cabin. He had changed his buckskin garments for those he had worn two years before. He had been saving them for such a day of need.

"I 'm going to untie your feet," he said to Broome, "and you 're coming outside."

He did as he had said, and Broome followed him out.

Jinny stood there, equipped with a home-made bridle and a sort of saddle of deer-skin. Leaning against a rock was a hamper closely packed. Gard had put out the big camp-fire and the place already wore an air of desolation.

Inside the cabin, alone, Gard looked about with poignant regret.

"It 's sure time to go," he told himself, sorrowfully, "But I hate to."

He turned to the hiding-place in the chimney and secured the buckskin bags, and the papers.

"There 's *that* to attend to, too," he murmured, fumbling the rumpled and stained sheets.

"It 's been a good place," he thought, as he shut the door of the shelter, and looked about outside. "To think what I was when I came here. Whatever. . . . yes, it 's the truth: it 's been the making of me."

He came and stood beside Broome.

"You get on the burro," he said.

The man demurred. "I 'd rather walk," he objected.

"I did n't ask you what you 'd rather do," was the reply. Gard was in no mood to bandy words, and a look at his face convinced the other that obedience was best.

When he was settled Gard proceeded to blindfold him, whereat the cowman swore fiercely under his breath.

"I 'll tell you now, Broome," Gard said, when he felt sure that the blindfold was secure, "You 've got nothing to be afraid of long 's you behave yourself. I won't leave you in the desert, but I 'll

run no risk of your ever finding your way back here. You wear that blind till I see fit to take it off, and that 'll be when we 're good and well away on the plain."

He shouldered the willow hamper.

"Come along, Jinny," he said, without looking around again, and in the gathering dusk the outfit took its way down the dry wash to the desert.

END OF BOOK ONE

BOOK TWO

THE SIN-BUSTER

CHAPTER I

IT was supper-time at the Sylvania Palace Grille. Sylvania was an outfitting town for prospectors and cow-punchers, and the occupants of the little oilcloth-covered tables in the "Grille" were almost exclusively of these two classes. The telephone operator and the express-agent had already taken their meal, and their departure, and this was not the day for the tri-weekly stage, the driver of which sometimes patronized Mrs. Hallard's rotisserie.

Sing Fat and Sing Gong, the two Chinese waiters, slipped about attending to the demands of patrons, and Mrs. Hallard herself, from behind a counter, kept tabs on the room and set out the liquid refreshments that the various customers called for.

The place was full of noise and bustle. The rattle of heavy crockery, the clink of steel knives and forks, the raking of boots and spurs over the plank floor, the clamor of voices and the monoto-

nous sing-song of the two Chinese calling orders to the cook, made up a medley in which, Mrs. Hallard was wont to declare, she could hardly hear herself think.

Despite this handicap, however, very little escaped her. She managed to hear, with no apparent difficulty, Steve Salton's gently preferred request that she "chalk up" the amount of his bill, and to catch his mumbled replies to her swift interrogatories as to his prospects for paying.

"It 's all right if you 're going to have it," she said, with business-like crispness. "But I ain't here for my health, you know. I want to see the color of your dust before too long."

"That 's reasonable," was Steve's reply. "You 'll see yer pay O. K. soon 's I locate, an' I 'm bound to when—"

"Cut it out!" Mrs. Hallard was already pushing change across the counter to another customer. "It 's chalked up, Steve."

"Kate! oh, Kate!" The voice of an old habitué came across the bedlam of sound: "Tell one o' them pigtailed lumps o' sin," it went on, "to fetch me another pony o' that white pizen o' your'n, quicker!"

"Gong," the presiding genius of the place said calmly to one of the China boys, "Go tell Tombstone he don't need no more gin. Tell 'im I said so."

Gong carried the message, delivering it over his shoulder as he set another customer's order of "ham and" before him. Tombstone's face, when he received it, was worthy of his name.

"Hell!" he ejaculated to anyone who might listen, "That 's what comes o' hashin' off 'n a woman."

He was still muttering gloomily when he went up to the desk to pay his score.

"Kate," he said with drunken gravity, as he swayed before her, "The love o' tyranny 's a bad thing in a man. It 's plumb perilous fer a female."

Mrs. Hallard glanced from his money to him.

"What 's eatin' you, Tombstone?" she demanded, ringing up the cash-register.

" 'T ain't me. It 's you, The love o' power air devourin' you to that extent you can't serve a man his rations without cuttin' 'em short. It were plumb tyrannical in you to send me that there message about the gin."

Mrs. Hallard's handsome black eyes surveyed him coldly.

"When a gent 's that far in he goes howlin' a lady's Christian name in public like you done just now," she said, "it 's a sign he don't need no more at present. There 's your change, Tombstone. Now vâmose!"

"Jake Lowrey!" she sent her voice level across

the reeking room to where a big, shaggy miner was disputing with one of the Chinamen, "This here 's an eatin'-house. 'T ain't a cussin' bee. If you don't like the victuals served you, you know what you kin do. But while you 're in here you quit swearin'."

"I ain't a cussin' fer cussin's sake," the big miner pleaded, above the laughter of the others. "I 'm only inquirin' into the nature o' this here sunny-side Fat 's fetched me with my hash."

"What color is it?" the proprietor of the eating-house asked, and the egg on Jake's plate immediately became the center of all attention.

"It 's yeller," its owner called, surveying it critically.

"Naw 't ain't neither; it 's red," another observer decided.

"It 's a lie. It 's just the color of an orange, an' oranges is yeller, ain't they?" This from a third critic.

"If it 's yeller it 's a new-laid egg," Mrs. Hallard pronounced, judicially. "If it 's red, it 's a fresh egg. Any other hen-fruit in this place is ranch eggs, unless it 's chickens, an' we don't serve them on the half-shell."

During the silence that followed this elucidation of the egg question the outside door of the place opened hesitatingly, and a young Mexican girl

looked in. Mrs. Hallard nodded, and she entered, leading by the hand a blind countryman who carried a guitar. The pair were evidently well known to Mrs. Hallard's patrons, and through the thick cloud of tobacco smoke that filled the room a number of the men shouted their greetings.

"*Buenos noches,* Conchita."

"Howdy, Buttercup."

"Put her here, 'Chita!"

The girl responded to each greeting with a flash of white teeth. A number of new-comers flocked in after her, finding seats and shouting their orders to the China-boys.

"Come on, 'Chita, hit 'er up!" some one called.

The girl had guided her companion to a chair, and the latter now twanged a few notes upon his guitar. Presently Conchita began to dance, slowly, at first, gradually quickening the pace, as she flitted back and forth in the little open space before the counter.

By degrees this space became too confined for her movements, and she drifted, like a bit of thistledown, along the aisles between the tables.

When she came opposite Jake Lowrey she gave a quick little leap and sprang upon the table before him, where she pirouetted among the bottles of condiments, and the tall glass of beer over which he was lingering. She skirted them all, daintily, her twinkling feet never still.

Suddenly she paused, balancing marvelously upon one toe, the other outstretched before the man. Lowrey's hand was already in his pocket, now it came out holding a silver coin which he placed upon the outstretched toe. In an instant it was snapped into the air and caught by the whirling dancer as it came down. A chorus went up from the assembly.

"Here y' are, Conchita!" "You know me, 'Chita." "Put 'er here, little gal!" The men bid openly for the dancer's favor, making haste to clear their tables as an inducement for her to notice them.

She sprang from Jake's table to another, across the aisle, and repeated her graceful, agile performance, weaving in and out among the dishes, kissing her fingers and smiling. Thus she wandered from table to table, picking her favorites and taking toll of each, going wilfully, it seemed, from silver lure held plainly in sight, to tables where much less was offered.

In and out she flashed, now here, now there, until it became apparent to all that she was working, step by step, toward the one table whose occupant had extended no invitation.

This one was in a corner of the room, and at it sat a young man who was to all appearances neither a prospector nor a cowboy, though he wore

a certain indefinable air of the plain. It showed in the bronze of his face, where it was not covered by a crisp brown beard, of a cut not worn by the usual desert-dweller; in his big, strong, tanned hands, that were supple and deft, despite the marks of hard work upon them, and in the steady, far-seeing gaze of his brown eyes.

The little dancer was close to the stranger's table now, and bending low to avoid a hanging lamp, she sprang upon it, and calling something to the guitar-player, set her feet a-twinkle through a bewildering maze of perfectly calculated steps.

She glided about the edge of her tiny stage; she blew lightly across it; she whirled madly in the centre of it. Everyone in the room gazed, spell-bound, realizing that their pet dancer was outdoing herself on this occasion.

Through it all the girl's eyes never left the face that was upturned to her gaze, the brown eyes regarding her with a sort of consideration that no others in the room had shown. Admiration, challenge, desire, those other eyes had betrayed, but these were different. Their quiet questioning held no reproach; they were full of friendliness, and of interest, and the coin that was presently laid upon her out-thrust toe was cheerfully, even gaily proffered, but the girl suddenly felt that both the interest and the gaiety were different from her own.

She tossed the silver dollar in air and caught it, with a nod of thanks. Then she sprang to the floor and ran up the aisle to where the blind Mexican still strummed his guitar strings.

"Este bestante!" she cried, pouring her earnings into his deep-crowned hat. *"No mas."*

She kissed her fingers gaily to the applauding men and turned toward the door. Only Kate Hallard's keen eyes noted, without seeming to see, that she had knotted one silver coin into a corner of her kerchief, and slipped it into her bosom.

No more visitors came into the Palace Grille. Sylvania had supped, and the men at the tables one by one came forward when the girl had gone, to pay their bills and slip out into the street. In the shortest of five minutes all were gone save the stranger in the corner, and the two Chinese, who padded softly about, putting the place to rights.

Kate Hallard had seen the stranger throughout mealtime. She noted, moreover, that he had more than one glance for her, the while he sat taking his supper in a deft, dainty way that some men get from much eating out of doors.

She was accustomed to being watched. More than one habitué of the place had taken his turn at gazing at her, during the year that she had been running the Palace Grille. She was not unpleasant to look at, if a man were not over-sensitive about

some things. She had an abundance of fair hair that was not bleached, despite the contrast of her black, long-lashed eyes. They were handsome eyes, if bolder and harder than they might have been if life itself had been less hard and bold for this woman of the desert.

That it *had* been hard was told by the cold, steady gaze of the dark eyes; by the worn line of the cheek, and by the half contemptuous, half tolerant set of thin lips that ought still to be full, and curved, and red.

As she glanced over at the stranger, when both the boys were out of the room, he left his seat and came down to the counter. He was taller than she had thought, she noted, and very slender. Despite this latter fact, however, he gave an impression of more than usual strength and activity. "He 'd be one blame hard man to down," she thought, in the instant before he was leaning upon the counter, tendering the price of his meal.

"This must be a mighty uncomfortable life for a woman," he said in a matter of fact way, watching her register the payment.

"Mebby," she answered, shortly. He spoke again, with a sort of gentle persistence.

"I should n't think you 'd care much about it?" There was a questioning quality in his voice, that Mrs. Hallard felt would presently win an answer,

whether she would or no. She went on "ridding up" the counter, and set a bottle of "square-face" back on the shelf behind her, with rather unnecessary energy.

"Don't know as my caring about it would make any difference," she finally said. "Leastways it never made none to me, an' I guess it need n't to nobody else." This last was said with some significance of emphasis.

"I know," the stranger spoke half absently. "But I 'd have thought," he continued, looking up, "that you would have preferred to keep to the range."

A startled look came into the hard black eyes.

"What do you mean?" Kate Hallard cried. "What do *you* know about the range? Who be you, anyway?"

"Did you sell it?" the stranger persisted, ignoring her questions.

"Sell it!" she burst out, shrilly. "If you know anything about it, you know I never got a chance to sell it. It melted; it never got to be mine."

Her voice had risen until the sound brought Sing Fat in from the kitchen to observe. Seeing this, she lowered it.

"Look a' here, Mister," she said, sharply, "If you 're as wise as you 're tryin' to make out, you know how I got done outer the range."

"I honestly don't know," was the reply. "I found your deed, and I 've been hunting you up to give it to you."

She stared at him, in a sort of awe.

"You found that deed?" she whispered.

"Yes; I have it. But how did you lose the property?"

She left off her desultory arranging of bottles, and leaned toward him, across the counter.

"Hallard bought the range off'n an Easterner named Oliphant," she began. "He was goin' to stock it, an' then you 'd never a' seen me here. He 's got the deed all square, an' he leaves it with me till he goes down to Phœnix to record it. Then he goes and gits killed bustin' an outlaw horse fer Hod Granger, and leaves me to manage fer myself."

The stranger uttered a little murmur of sympathy.

"But you had the deed," he suggested, as Mrs. Hallard seemed lost in thought.

"Oh, yes! I had it all right. But I give it to Frank Arnold to record fer me. He was goin' down to Phœnix, an' I guess they was some hoodoo onto it; fer Frank, he got killed too—got killed in a cloudburst—an' when they found his body every bone in it was broke an' they was hardly a rag onto it. So the deed was lost."

"But surely this man Oliphant would have made it right for you?"

"Would he though? That 's where you ain't guessin' right." Mrs. Hallard's laugh had no mirth in it.

"That 's what they told me," she said. "An' so I see a lawyer, an' he undertakes to write Oliphant, that 's gone back east. But after a spell he comes an' tells me the sneakin' thief 's gone an' sold that prop'ty twice, an' cleared out. Think o' that, will you, an' him a old, old man. . . . Out here fer his health, he was. Lord! if he don't need a hotter climate 'n even this is."

"Was the second deed recorded?"

"You bet your life it was. The man that 'd bought it saw to that, an' he did n't have the luck to git killed, neither."

"I must say he tried to act decent, though," Mrs. Hallard added, "but o' course he 'd paid his money fer the prop'ty, same 's Ed Hallard did, an' Ed, he paid twelve thousand."

"Yes, I know." The stranger had the deed in his hand. "What did the man do for you?" he asked.

"Well: not much, but mebby he would n't a' done that if it had n't bin fer Mr. Westcott—"

"*Who* did you say?" The stranger's gentle voice suddenly sharpened to keen interest.

"Ash Westcott. He was my lawyer," Mrs. Hallard explained.

"It was he who told you about the second sale?"

"Sure! How else 'd I know?"

"I see." He stood pondering her story until at last she took up the tale again.

"Mr. Westcott—he talked it over with the man that bought it. I did n't have nothin' but my word to back me; an' as he told me, I really could n't make a claim, an' I did n't have no case to go after Oliphant with. But the other feller he give me three hundred dollars fer a quit claim, an' that set me up here."

"You gave a quit claim?"

"Just to make the man feel easy. Westcott said it 'd be the best way. He was mighty kind about raisin' the money fer me. I had n't a red after I 'd settled up Ed's debts an' small matters."

"Here 's your deed."

She took it, eagerly, and they pored over it together. The stranger pointed to a signature at the end of the acknowledgment.

"Do you know that man?" he asked.

She studied the name. "Never hearn of him," she said, "What 's he got to do with it?"

"He was the notary before whom the deed was acknowledged," was the reply. "If we could get hold of him we might learn something, and I think

it would pay you to try to find out something from Oliphant."

"I don't know where he is," was the bitter response, "an' if I did, I tell you I ain't got a cent to do anything with. I ain't more 'n makin' a livin' here."

"I guess that could be fixed," the stranger said. "I 've got some."

She looked him over, fixedly, with her black eyes.

"An' where do you come in?" she demanded.

He laughed, ever so gently.

"I 'm not figuring about that," he answered. "But if I were you, and could get hold of the money to do it, I 'd try and see this thing through; and," he added, significantly, "I guess I 'd hunt up some other lawyer than this Mr. Westcott."

He met her gaze without hesitation.

"There 's some folks does say Westcott 's sharp," she said, slowly. "Be you one of 'em?"

The man smiled, without speaking.

"I don't believe it," Kate Hallard mused. "He would n't dare. Besides," she added, after a little thought, "he 'd a known he was fair skinnin' me, and he was the one tried to see to it I had a little money out'n it. He would n't a' taken my last nickel."

A strange look came into the man's face.

"Maybe he did n't spend much time reflecting on that," he said, slowly. "Anyway, if I were you I 'd see about it, and I guess the money can be found."

"You ain't told me yet who you be," Kate Hallard remarked, studying him narrowly.

"My name is Gabriel Gard."

"Well, Mister Gabriel Gard," she said, "I never hearn of *you* before, an' I ain't sure I understand as well 's I wanter before I make any deals."

"You can trust me," Gard said, simply, meeting her eyes.

"And this Westcott," she exclaimed, sharply, "If he 's done me so! If he has—"

She gripped the counter, her teeth showing, savagely.

"Easy!" said Gard quietly, "Better keep cool. The man ain't worth riling yourself up over. Besides, I believe we can do something, with this."

He touched the deed, and she picked it up again.

"I want to try to get hold of Oliphant," he began, outlining his plan, "and this notary, Arthur Sawyer."

Kate Hallard regarded him with an unwonted expression of mingled helplessness and perplexity.

"Oliphant 's gone back east as I said," she answered, "An' this here Sawyer 's new to me. I never knew nothing about him."

Gard stood considering, a long sequence of unexpected difficulties developing itself before his mind. He had found the Hallard deed among the deputy's papers, and had kept it carefully, against such time as he could restore it to the owner. His first act after leaving Broome, when the pair reached the railroad track, had been to go to Yuma. Here he acquired the habiliments of civilization, and found a temporary home for Jinny. He had stopped in Tucson long enough to file his claim there, and then set about finding the Edward Hallard to whom the deed referred. It was a matter of a fortnight before his inquiries revealed the fact of Ed Hallard's death, and the whereabouts of his widow. Now he had no way of judging how long it might be before he could strike the trail of this unknown Arthur Sawyer who had taken the acknowledgment of the deed.

In any event, he realized that the delay meant postponement of certain cherished plans of his own; perhaps danger to them. He had met a man at Yuma, and another in Tucson, who had known him as Barker, and though they had not recognized him, so greatly was he changed, still he could not ignore the possibility that any day someone might remember him. Until his plans were perfected, the territory was perilous ground for him.

He frowned a moment, lost in thought; then he squared his shoulders and met Mrs. Hallard's gaze with eyes that were full of steady peace. He had made up his mind. His own matters must wait until he had straightened out this woman's tangle of wrong.

"We 've got to find this man Sawyer," he repeated, "And I hardly know where to begin trailing him. We 've got to get hold of Westcott, too; you say he 's at Tucson?"

"He lives there," was the reply; "or did last I knew. I ain't heard from him in a long time now. No need to."

"Well: I guess the best thing to do first, is to write to him. You tell him you 've found your deed: no need to say how. We 'll see what he 's got to say, and—" There was the least perceptible hesitation, "if he comes up here, and you want me to," he continued evenly, "I 'll talk with him for you."

Mrs. Hallard looked relieved.

"You 're mighty good," she cried, "Fact is I 'm afraid . . . you see, I . . ."

The outer door was pushed open and a big Mexican vaquero put in his head.

"What 's up, Manuel?" Mrs. Hallard asked.

The vaquero hesitated: "*No mas* supper?" he said, tentatively.

"Supper all right," was the reply. "You 're late, Manuel. What you doin' off the range?"

The Mexican made a laughing gesture, crooking up his elbow. Mrs. Hallard frowned, noting his condition.

"You don't git no booze here," she said, "You 've had enough. Fat 'll bring you some coffee an' you eat a meal an' git back on the range. You had trouble enough last time, I should think."

The fellow sat down, shamefacedly, and Sing Fat came in to serve him. A moment later another customer entered.

"That 's always the way it goes," Kate Hallard commented, "One straggler always brings another. They 'll come dribblin' in now, one at a time, till closin'-time. . . . But I say, Mr. Gabriel Gard, don't you go thinkin' I don't appreciate what you 've done. I 'll write Westcott like you say, an' mebby it 'll come out all right; but I ain't much hopeful of it. Things don't, much, outside o' story books."

The hard look was in her face again. Gard met it with his steady smile.

"You watch this one come out right," said he. "I guess things mostly are right, if we could see 'em straight." He was turning toward the door.

"We 're liable sometimes to pick 'em up by the wrong end," he added. "We 'll find out which is

the right end of this before we lift it, and then—" the smile deepened, and included the dark eyes—"Then we 'll lift," he called back as he closed the door behind him.

Sylvania's one business street was lighted only by the stars, and the feebler rays that shone from a few illuminated windows. In the yellow glare from one of these a group of cowboys were dismounting by the rail of Jim Bracton's Happy Family Saloon.

"Howdy, Stranger," one of them called, as he stumbled against Gard on reaching the ground, "Excuse *me*."

He glanced a second time at Gard's face and smiled, genially. "Thinkin' o' minglin' up in this mad whirl?" he asked, "Come on." And together they entered the precincts of the Happy Family.

CHAPTER II

THE scene in which Gard found himself was of a sort he had known familiarly enough in years past. The low-ceilinged shanty, rough-boarded and blackened; the sawdust-strewn floor, the painted bar with its distorting mirror and motley array of bottles, and even the faces of the men showing duskily through the smoke-veiled light of flaring coal-oil lamps, seemed to him like details of a half-forgotten dream.

The evening was fairly begun and the place was filling. A group of prospectors near the bar were listening derisively to the brand-new theory one of their number was propounding, regarding the whereabouts of the lost Peg-leg mine. At the farther end of the room the thump of a broken-down wheel-of-fortune and the monotonous calls of its manipulator, proclaimed the occupation of the crowd of Mexicans gathered there. Some cow-boys at a table near the door were engaged in a game of dominoes, and beyond them three or four

men were playing poker. Gard noticed with some surprise that one man of this group was an Indian, who seemed to be betting freely.

"That there 's old Joe Papago," the cowboy who had come in with him volunteered, noting his glance. "Old Joe, he 's the best-fixed Injun 'round here. I hearn he sold ten head o' beef cows over t' Tucson, yesterday, an' got his money. Must 'a' got whiskey, too, by the looks of 'im."

He put a foot on the bar rail and surveyed the scene tolerantly.

"There 's a mighty ornery bunch o' human buzzards hangs out in this town o' Sylvania," he said, candidly. "But a feller 's gotter pass some time in social pursuits now 'n again, an' he has to take his kind as he meets up with 'em."

Gard was still recently enough from solitude to thrill with the sense of human companionship.

" 'T ain't always the roughest looking ones that are the worst," he suggested, sympathetically.

"That 's where you 're shoutin'." The cowpuncher brought a big fist down emphatically. "For all right hell," he said, "a real polished gent can give these chaps cards an' spades an' beat 'em to the devil when he tries. We had one here last year, a gent that played cards—played 'em too damn well fer his own health, finally. But he was that polished in his manners as I ever went any-

wheres to see, an' he could lie in five different languages."

"Yes, sir," he added, meditatively, "five different kinds o' mortal human conversations that feller had a cinch onto; an' he could n't behave hisself in ary one of 'em."

"What you havin'?" he suddenly broke off to ask, as the barkeeper signified his readiness to attend to them.

"I 'm drinking lemonade," Gard said, and the cow-puncher took another look at him.

"Gimme the same," he finally told the barkeeper, with serious politeness.

"Mebby I 'd oughter beg your pardon"; he turned to Gard with a look of anxiety on his face. "I reckon I was a little careless in my talk if you happen to be a sin-buster."

"A what?"

"Sin-buster. You sabe bronco-buster, don't you; an' trust-buster?"

"Oh, sure."

"Well then, ain't sin-buster plain United States? It 's what a preacher-feller oughter be if he 's on his job, ain't it?"

"I guess it is," was Gard's reply, "but I 'm not a preacher. I just have n't been drinking much of late years, and don't know 's I care to."

"Oh! that 's it? Well lemonade 's pretty good

stuff," the cow-puncher said, cheerfully. "I can't seem to remember when I 've had none, but I reckon it 'll taste first rate. I ordered it thinkin' you was maybe religious."

He finished a little ruefully, with a questioning inflection on the last words. Gard laughed.

"I 'm not, I guess," he said, "leastways not so 's to hurt me."

"That 's good," the cow-puncher nodded, approvingly, "Though religion don't hurt a good person," he added, meditatively.

He removed his broad-brimmed felt hat and peered into the crown. His head was thatched with close-cropped, grizzly-gray hair; his face was tanned and seamed by wind and weather, thin-lipped and stern as to the mouth, under his short moustache, with steadfast blue eyes that had the plainsman's and the sailor's trick of vigilance. It was a face to be trusted—shrewd, honest, capable, yet full of a simplicity that was almost childlike. Gard found himself warming to the fellow.

"I suppose you belong about here?" he suggested.

"Sure. My name 's Sandy Larch. I 'm foreman out 't the Palo Verde, below here. Know the range?"

Gard admitted that he did not. "I 'm new 'round here," he explained, as he told his name.

"I 'm looking for a man," he added, tentatively, "a notary named Sawyer: Arthur Sawyer. Ever hear of him?"

Sandy Larch reflected, repeating the name thoughtfully. "Was he a lunger?" he finally asked, "A little feller, with broken wind, an' a cough that 'd drive you wild to hear?"

"I don't know." The description took Gard's memory back to the days when he, too, had had such a cough. "I never saw him," he explained, "But I 'm mighty anxious to get hold of him."

"There was a man up in the Navajo country," Sandy continued, "Where the *patron* was runnin' the Bar Circle G. He stayed 'round quite a considerable, doctorin' his lungs. Then the *patron* sold out up there; he had this range too, in them days; an' I ain't never seen this Sawyer chap down this way. The *patron* might tell you. Know him—Morgan Anderson?"

It was a name well known in the territory. Gard had seen its owner once or twice, in the old days. He said something of the sort to the cowpuncher.

"He 's away just now," the latter told him; "but he 'll be back in a few days, an' you can ask him. I 'd know whatever did become o' that chap. . . . Look a' there, will you?"

He glanced over to where the men were playing

poker. One of them had reached over and pulled a big brown flask from the Papago's coat-pocket.

"Time you treated us to a drink, Joe," he said, with a half-insolent air of fellowship.

The Indian nodded, smiling vacuously, and the bottle went around the table, each man helping himself. When it came back to its owner he rose with it, and crossed to the door, going out into the street. The men at the table looked at one another with a grin and one of them examined the hand of cards that the Indian had left behind him. He had just laid it down again when the Papago came back, and the game was resumed.

"Would n't that rattle your slats now?" Sandy Larch asked, disgustedly.

"Joe," he continued, "don't dast drink even his own lickker in here. It 's agin the law for an Indian; an' Jim Bracton would n't stand fer 't; he goes outside to take a drink, while them buzzards swills it in here, right before him; an' they 're gittin' his wad, too."

Gard made no reply. He had more than once glanced at the group, while he and the foreman were talking, and now he watched them interestedly, an intent look in his deep eyes. A moment later he had turned, and was moving toward the players.

"Thinkin' o' sittin' in?" Sandy Larch asked,

jestingly. "They 's sure need of an honest-notioned man to deal them cards. But it 'd be ticklish business. . . . Good Lord!"

He was staring in earnest, now, and instinctively reached for the gun in his back-pocket, though he did not draw it. The stranger had approached the poker-players, and stood over them, his big, empty hands outspread upon the table before them.

The men whom he had interrupted looked up in surprise. The prospectors who had been discussing the Peg-leg suddenly became silent. The dominoe-players ceased the rattle of their game and stared. A hush was upon the whole room, a tense feeling of pending excitement. One or two men instinctively measured their own distance from the door, and from the center of coming activities. Jim Bracton stared open-mouthed from behind his bar.

"Who is the feller?" he demanded. "Friend o' yourn, Larch?"

"Not that I knows," was the foreman's reply. "I never saw him before, but I 'm sure willin' to sit in to any game where he holds a hand."

He started forward, ready to draw on the instant, but the stranger seemed not to see him. He had gathered the eyes of the poker-players in his own indignant gaze, and now addressed them collectively:

"Gentlemen," he said, quietly, "you ought not to be doing this."

"Glory be!" groaned Sandy Larch under his breath, "now wha' d' you think o' that fer a simple speech?"

The astounded men to whom Gard spoke sat silent, not one of them making a move. They were held spell-bound by the gentle quality of his fearlessness.

"Somebody 's been breaking the law, and selling this Indian whiskey," Gard went on, in a matter-of-fact tone. "It was a mighty bad thing to do, and you are doing something a heap wickeder. He is drunk now, and he does n't rightly sense what he 's doing. You ought not to play cards with him. You 're drinking his liquor and helping him to get drunker; and—*you 're cheating him, out of his money.*"

The big wheel-of-fortune had ceased to whirr now, and the silence of the room was broken only by a snarling question from one of the men Gard had addressed.

"What in hell o' your business is it?"

"It 's every man's business when another man breaks the law," was the quiet reply. "You 'd better quit playing now, friend," Gard continued, turning to the Papago. "You 'd better quit right off, while you 've got something left, and go home."

"You stay where you be, Joe," growled the man who had asked the question. "Don't you climb out fer no tenderfoot. I 'll settle the—"

He stopped speaking as the stranger's eyes blazed full upon him for an instant.

"You go *now,* Joe," Gard said, in a low, even voice.

Like a man in a dream old Joe rose, slipping into his pocket the coins he had been about to put into the game when Gard interfered. The tenseness of the situation had brought him to some measure of sobriety, and he did not reel as he left the room. A moment later the patter of his pony's unshod feet came to the listening ears within.

Gard still held the other men in a gaze that seemed to search and estimate the hidden thought of each.

"Now they 'll kill him, sure," Sandy Larch thought, slipping nearer, but the stranger took no notice of him.

"Friends," he said, breaking at last the tense silence that ruled the room, "There 's a law against making an Indian drunk, and there 's a law against robbing him. They 're white men's laws; and white men ought to keep 'em."

"It ain't right"; he went on, still leaning upon the table, and the men listened, as if hypnotized. "There 's things a man can't do without getting

lower down than any man wants to be, and cheating a drunken Indian is one of 'em. That 's the truth of it. You ought not to do it, and when you do somebody 's got to make you stop. That 's why I interfered. . . . There ain't any reason though," he added, as if an after thought, "why you should n't go on with your game, now; I 'm going to say good-night."

He straightened up, and turning his back upon the group walked quietly toward the door. Half-a-dozen men were ready, now, to draw in his defense, but there was no need. Not a man of those whom he had brought to book moved. They sat like men dazed, until the door had closed upon Gard; then, with an oath, one of them seized upon the cards.

"What th' Almighty 's the matter with you fools?" he growled. "Whose deal is it, anyhow? Git int' the game, you. This ain't no damned kindergarten!"

They resumed their playing, sullenly, and the spell upon the room was broken. Sandy Larch wiped his damp forehead upon a huge red handkerchief, and turned to the bar.

"Jim," he said, feebly, "set down that there bottle o' whiskey, will ye? I sure need it in my business right now."

He measured a liberal potion and swallowed it.

"An' he said he wa'nt no sin-buster," he muttered. "He sure was on the job, though.

"But wa'nt that a sweet line o' talk to hand out to men folks, Jim? How 'd it come they did n't kill 'im?"

"Search me," was the bar-keeper's reply. "I had my gun all limbered. I sure expected the place 'd be shot up."

"He tells 'em it was n't right," Sandy mused, absently refilling his glass. "He tells them b-a-a-d men *'t was n't right!* An' there they sits, like they was throwed an' hog-tied, while he turns 'round his back to 'em an' walks out like they ain't a thing on earth to be afraid of. Lord! He can have me!"

He drained his glass and departed, leaving the Happy Family to its own devices.

Gard, meantime, had walked out beyond the town to the open desert. His spirit was full of trouble, hot with indignation at what he had seen, oppressed with a sense of the complexity of the life into which he was so suddenly plunged. It was hard to realize that the still, bright stars above him were shining, as well, upon the clean peace that dwelt in the glade. His thoughts turned thither like homing birds, and he walked on across the cactus dotted sands, until he could look toward the shadowy bulk of the far mountains, visible in the marvelous desert starlight. Somewhere in that

direction, he knew, the glade lay, and gradually a feeling came to him of quiet, and of renewing strength. He was able to think calmly of the sudden complication in his plans, and to consider the best course to pursue.

He would see Morgan Anderson as soon as possible. In the meantime Mrs. Hallard would write to Westcott. He would probably be obliged to talk with the lawyer for her: the mere thought set his nerves tense; until this matter was settled his own affairs must wait. Of this there was no question in his mind as he directed his steps in a wide circuit back to the town.

He was nearing its outskirts when he felt a light touch upon his arm. One of his hands was seized in two small, clinging ones, and covered with soft, hot kisses. He turned quickly, freeing himself with a little shake, and looked into the upturned face of 'Chita, the dancer.

The bright stars lighted her face to a mystic, witching glow; her eyes gleamed upon him in soft summons as she leaned toward him, seeking again to possess herself of his hand.

He drew back, ever so little, and seeing this she stretched both arms out to him in a wide, pleading gesture, her smiling lips parted in mute supplement to the invitation of her gleaming eyes.

Still as a graven man he stood, regarding her

steadily, and she came no nearer. Instead, she shrank a little, her hands dropping to her sides, her dark eyes fastened upon his. Gard's stern eyes softened and he came a step closer, brooding over the trembling girl without touching her.

"Child," he said, "have n't you any mother? Is n't there anybody to take care of you?"

Only her heaving shoulders answered him.

"Don't cry," Gard said, his voice full of pity. "I—I don't like to hear little girls cry."

She shivered toward him again, and reaching quickly, her arm stole round his neck, the other hand seeking his face. "I love you," she whispered. Her fingers pressed his lips, and he put her back, firmly.

"Don't," he said sharply. "You don't understand. Why—you 're only a little girl. Where is your home, child? I am going to take you there."

She sprang back with a cry, and her anger flashed out upon him.

"Oh!" she stamped one foot upon the sand. "Do I not understand? Think you I do not? You miserable! You have never the heart of a *caballero.* You are but *hombre,* after all!"

She caught her breath.

"Gringo swine!" she hissed. *"Hombre!* It is not the heart of a *caballero!"*

"I have n't got the heart to crush little girls," he

answered, "if that 's what you mean. Tell me where you live. I 'm going to take you home. You must not be out here alone."

He spoke now with protecting concern. The girl's mood had changed again, and she was sobbing passionately.

"Do you live in the town?" Gard persisted, and she shook her head. Half unconsciously she was walking beside him as he moved forward.

"Hush!" she suddenly cried, checking her sobs.

Across the desert came the sound of a man's voice, calling angrily. 'Chita put out a hand, arresting Gard's steps.

"It is my father," she whispered. "He is blind; but he has ears of the coyote. If he hears you—if he knows—he will beat me!"

She was but a child, now, in her terror, and Gard reassured her.

"He 'll never know," he said. "No one will ever know. You go back, now, like a good girl. And remember: you must never do a silly thing like this again. Will you promise me?"

She lifted a pale face toward his, in the starlight. Her eyes were luminous, now, with new, strange emotion.

"Señor," she whispered, "it *is* the heart of a *caballero*. Señor—you are good."

"You will promise?" Gard persisted.

Again that summoning voice rang across the desert. The girl called in Spanish that she was coming.

"I promise," she cried, with a sobbing catch of the breath. *"Buenos noches,* Señor."

She caught Gard's hand again, for an instant, resting her cheek against it, the fraction of a second.

"Buenos noches," she whispered again, and sped away into the soft, starry gloom.

CHAPTER III

THE desert was a marvel of mauve and yellow and rose-color, under a canopy of blue. The sun was not too hot, and the air was vital and sustaining. Helen Anderson, riding over the hard plain, sniffed it joyously. She loved the smell of the desert, that intangible, indescribable odor that is yet so permeating: one of the fixed facts of the region. She had missed it, hungrily, during four years of exile from the Palo Verde.

She lifted her eyes to the sapphire-blue mountains on the horizon and laughed aloud for sheer joy, with a sense of physical well-being, as her vision ranged from these to nearer scenes. She was passing a Papago's hut, a tiny structure of cream-colored adobe, with a dark roof of thatch. The hut itself was hardly larger than its own big chimney, and squatted on the yellow sand, in its little patch of shade, was an Indian woman.

She wore a skirt of dark blue stuff, and a white reboso was wound about the upper part of her body

and carried over her dark hair. Her dusky arms were bare, and her brown hands patted and shaped and smoothed a pot of red clay, soon to be baked in the little kiln where a fire was already glowing.

Helen called a gay greeting to her and she looked up, showing her white teeth in a broad smile. Then she paused in her deft handling of the wet, red clay, to flip a bit gently at the inquisitive nose of Patsy, Helen's fox terrier, who was minded to investigate the pottery operations. Helen called the dog and lifted her pony to a gallop. So the three went scampering off in a wild race over the level sand. A mile was measured before the girl drew rein again, with a blissful sigh of pure happiness.

"And to think," she told herself, with a little feeling of unreality about it all, "that back in New England there is snow on the ground, and fire in the furnaces, and people who must be out of doors are thumping their arms, to keep warm, and telling one another what a glorious, bracing climate they have."

She fell into a brown study and her reins lay loose upon the pony's neck while she went back over the four happy years she had spent in the land of snow. How strange it seemed that so short a while ago the east, New England, even college itself, had been to her mere names. Then, for four

years, they had been such happy entities. What a beautiful memory her whole college life was!

"And now," she mused, "it seems as if it were all fading back into the dream again, yet I know things are as real, back there, as they ever were, and the real me, that Radcliffe helped make, is here in a real place, with the realest sort of things to do.

"For one thing," she said, half aloud, "I can keep right on making Father glad I 'm home for good, and showing him that he need not worry about me."

That thought checked a growing wistfulness in her mood. Morgan Anderson *was* glad to have his girl back, even though he had his well-defined doubts as to the desert being the best place for her. Her college years had been weary years to the lonely man, and his happiness in the new order was a beautiful part of Helen's home-coming.

The girl could scarcely remember her mother. There had always been Jacinta, her half-Spanish nurse, now the household factotum, in the background of her childish years. In the foreground was the well-loved figure of her father, who had been her friend and constant companion. It was he who had taught her to read and to write, and to do plane and solid geometry: to ride hard, to shoot straight, and to tell the truth. Beyond these her education, other than what old Jacinta could im-

part, had been received at the hands of one of the cowboys on the range, a college graduate with a love for the plains.

Aunt Everett had been horrified at this arrangement. Aunt Everett was her father's relative, who, on two formidable occasions, had descended upon the rancho and undertaken to revolutionize the household. This she did out of a sense of duty to Helen, who, she declared, was growing up in sheer savagery and ignorance.

Helen was twenty years old when Aunt Everett paid her second, and last, visit. It was then the momentous decision was reached that the girl should go to college. It was for the sake of his own youthful dream of Harvard, that had never come true, that Morgan Anderson had fixed upon Radcliffe, and Helen's four beautiful years had become a fact.

She sighed again, recalling those years.

"They were so lovely," she murmured, "and they have sent me back—how is it old Marcus Aurelius phrased it?—'free from all discontent with that to which thou returnest.'

"Free from discontent?" she cried, taking in another deep, long breath of the buoyant air, "I should say I am! I was never in my life so abundingly happy!"

The pony was walking slowly, and as Helen

looked about she became aware that Patsy was not in attendance upon them.

She halted, anxiously, the dog was a recent acquisition, given her by Sandy Larch, on her return from college, she was training him to keep with her. This was the first time she had really forgotten him. She reproached herself as she rode back over the way they had come, for letting her wits go wool-gathering.

She called the terrier, reining in from time to time, but there was no response, and becoming at last thoroughly alarmed, she dismounted, dropping the pony's reins over his head to the ground, and started on foot to investigate among the cacti.

"He 's found a gopher-hole somewhere," she said to herself, as she went whistling about among the greasewood and cacti.

She ceased to whistle, presently, vexed at Patsy's lack of response, and continued her search in silence until, rounding a cactus-grown knoll, strewn with loose stone, she suddenly halted, warned by a familiar, burring sound that for an instant made her heart jump.

A few yards away from her was the terrier, rigid, immovable, the hair along his back, even the loose skin between his shoulders, stiffly erect. His lips were drawn back from his white teeth; his ears were pricked forward, and his whole body shud-

dered with the vibration of his low, continuous growling.

Near the dog, lying prone, his face turned toward her, Helen saw a man, and still beyond him, alert, motionless, save for the minute quiver of that ominous, buzzing tail, a huge rattler was coiled, its cold, wicked little eyes fixed upon the dog.

"I must not scream; I must not faint," the horrified girl told herself, trying to stand steady, and to think quick.

If the dog or the snake saw her neither made any sign. They glared, unmoving, at each other, across the helpless man. Neither dared attack, or retreat, and Helen knew that any move on either her part or the man's, would cause the snake to strike—the dog to spring.

The man lay exactly in the storm-center, when trouble should come, and it seemed as though neither dog nor snake could much longer maintain the horrid statu quo. Patsy's low growling was dreadful to hear, and the snake's steady rattle brought the sweat of sheer fright to her forehead.

She glanced again at the man and his gaze met hers steadily. It was clear that he was alive to the full peril of his position, yet there was no sign of agitation in his face. Rather, his glance seemed meant to reassure her. Shamed by her own fears,

Helen summoned her faculties to meet the situation.

She had grown up in the desert. She had known rattlesnakes before ever she went to college, and her four years of sophistication had not crowded out that earlier knowledge. Her brain seemed suddenly to clear, her nerves to harden. She knew what could be done, if she could but trust Patsy to hold steady. She remembered Sandy Larch's boast, that the dog was game. Now was the time to show it, if he was.

"Steady, Patsy; steady, boy; quiet; quiet, boy!"

Over and over she whispered the words, oh, so gently, that she might not startle the young dog, and all the while she was slowly, slowly, raising her right hand, in which was her riding-whip. She was too thorough a plainswoman to use such a thing on a horse, but she carried it to use in training the terrier.

"Steady, Patsy; down, boy; down!"

The whip was extended in front of her, now, and she was moving it gently from side to side. The snake had caught sight of it, and was following it with its eyes, swaying in unison with the whip's motion.

Never staying the steady movement of her arm, Helen crept forward, whispering reassurance to the dog, until at last, still waving the whip, she

dropped to one knee and slipped her fingers under his collar. He stopped his growling and nestled to her with a little whimper. When she commanded him to charge he dropped to his belly and lay perfectly still, his eyes fixed upon the snake.

"If you can manage to turn the thing's head a bit, little girl;—" it was the man who spoke, in a low, level voice—"so he can't notice what I 'm doing, I 'll fix him."

With a little nod, Helen stood up and began moving sidewise, still swinging the whip. Thoroughly hypnotized, the snake swayed with its movement, those beady little eyes never leaving it. The rattler did not see the stealthy glide of the man's hand, or the gleaming steel that was presently leveled at that flat, venomous head. An instant after there was a sharp report, and the snake was whipping the desert in its death struggle as Helen again caught the terrier by the collar. The man essayed to rise, and sank back with a sharp exclamation of pain.

"I guess I 've hurt my foot," he said, answering Helen's look of inquiry.

"I—my horse took to pitching, and slung me here," he went on, sitting up. "I can't think what got the fellow, or me either," he added, with a look of chagrin. "I never thought I needed a bucking-strap; but it seems as if I did."

He spoke lightly, partly to hearten the girl, who was white and shaken, after her horrid experience, and partly to draw her attention from the victim of his shot, now stretched on the desert.

Another effort and he got to his feet; but the first attempt to step brought him to one knee, frowning with pain.

"And I don't suppose there 's a stick in sight, that would give me any support," he said, looking about.

"I 'm afraid not," Helen answered, following his glance; and then she remembered.

"I can bring up my horse," she cried. "I left him by the mesquite when I dismounted to look for Patsy, here."

"Patsy 's sure an enterprising little dog," the man said, smiling, "I don't just know whether I have to thank him for stirring up the little difficulty a while ago, or for keeping it from being worse before you came."

"I 'm afraid it was he that roused the rattler," replied Helen, ruefully. "He is young, yet, and has his sense to get."

The man laughed. "I was a little stunned when my horse landed me here," he explained, shyly. "First thing I knew I was sort of waking up, and that was the tableau I beheld. I did n't do much that was strenuous, from then on."

Helen was wondering, curiously, who the man could be. He was evidently not a cow-boy, or a prospector, and she knew that if he were a cattleman or a mining expert, a stranger in that part of the country, he would naturally have been the hacienda's guest. Such visitors in the neighborhood were always for her father. Perhaps he was on his way to him, now.

"Were you going to the Palo Verde?" she asked, impulsively. "I am Helen Anderson. Father will be sorry you have had an accident."

"I thought you must belong there," he said, simply, "and I was going to tell you my name. It 's Gard—not a very long one," with a smile, "and I *was* going to the Palo Verde, though your father does n't know me. I wanted to see him on business."

"Then the best thing we can do," Helen said, briskly, "is to get there at once. I 'm going to ask you to keep Master Patsy here, while I go for the horse."

She was already speeding down the knoll, and a moment later she returned leading Dickens, the pony, who had stood patiently where she left him.

For a time it looked as though the stranger was not going to get into the saddle. Dickens was restless and nervous over his awkward approaches, and the pain in Gard's foot was excruciating, but

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after many agonized attempts he finally mounted. He was white and faint, after the effort, but he smiled resolutely down upon the girl while he adjusted the stirrup he could use.

"I am glad you ride this way," he said, indicating her military tree. "I thought I 'd have to sit in one of those queer dishes ladies usually ride on."

Helen laughed. "If I waited to have horses gentled to the side-saddle," she answered, "I should never get anything to ride. It 's the only way, here in the desert, and Father always thought it was the safer way."

She was walking beside the pony, her broad-brimmed felt hat pushed back, that she might look up at her guest. "I used a side-saddle back east," she added.

"I think this way is a lot better," Gard replied. He wished she would look up again. It seemed to him that his eyes had never beheld anything more delicious than her upturned face, with its background of broad hat-brim.

He could only glimpse it when she looked straight ahead, as she was doing now. Her nose had a little tilt, that made him think her always just about to look up, and kept him in a pleasant state of expectation. He could not see her mouth and chin without leaning forward, and he shrank, shyly, from doing that, but he studied the firm brown

cheek, where just a touch of deep color came and went, and the neat sweep of fair hair back into the shadow of the broad hat, and he had noted when she looked up that her eyes were gray, looking out friendly-wise under level brows.

"You were a mighty plucky little girl to tackle that rattler," he said, with a sudden realization of her courage. Her short riding-habit misled him and he did not think of her as grown up.

Helen stiffened, resentful of what seemed like a too familiar address. Then she recognized his mistake, with a curious little sense of pleasure in it.

"That was nothing," she answered, with a light-hearted laugh, "Sandy Larch taught me the trick. I played that way with more than one rattler when"— "when I was a child," she had been about to say, but she changed it, and added, "before I went away to school." "No use dragging in 'college' " she told herself. "He might think I was trying to seem important."

"I know Sandy Larch," Gard said. "He 's a good man."

"So are you," was the thought that flashed through the girl's mind as she glanced upward again. She dismissed it instantly, with a feeling of astonishment at herself. She was not given to speculate in such wise on the quality of chance acquaintances.

"Sandy 's just Sandy," she replied. "One of the best friends I ever had. I can't remember the time when he was n't on hand looking after me."

There was silence for a while, till Gard spoke again.

"I hate to make you walk," he apologized, "You 'll be all tuckered out."

"Not a bit," she declared, stoutly. "You must be new to the desert, if you don't know what miles people can walk here, without getting tired."

The bronze of his face was tinged with a faint red.

"No," said he, "I ain't new to the desert. Not much I ain't new; even—" with a mortified laugh —"if I did let my bronco throw me. I guess, though, I 'm new to little girls," he continued. "Seem 's if you ought to be tired. You don't look so very big."

"I 'm strong, though." Somehow, his assumption that she was a little girl gave Helen a pleasant sense of ease in his company. She glanced up at him again, and was startled to see how pale he had grown, under his tan. His forehead was knit with pain, and his teeth were set against one lip.

"I wish I could do something for you!" she cried, in quick sympathy. "But we 're nearly there; and Father 's as good as a doctor, any day."

"It 's all right," he muttered. "I was just a fool.

I thought I 'd see if I could n't get down and walk; so I tried putting that foot in the stirrup."

"That was a clever thing to do," Helen scolded, "I see you do not know how to believe people when they say they are not tired."

She quickened her pace, that he might see how far she was from weariness.

"I 'm sorry," he said, humbly. "I did n't mean to do anything to set you running off like that."

No reply. They went on again in a silence that lasted for several moments.

"Ain't you going to forgive me?" he asked, presently.

Helen considered; not what he had said however. She was more deeply interested in deciding why his "ain't" was not offensive to her college-bred ears.

"After all," she thought, deliberating it, "those things do not matter so much when people themselves are real."

"I won't do it again," the voice beside her pleaded, in an exaggeration of penitence, and she laughed, looking up at him.

"I did n't think you 'd be such a hard-hearted little girl," Gard said, reproachfully.

"I am not," she replied. "I am only sensible. You should believe what people tell you."

He made no reply. He was trying to decide how old the child could be.

"I guess," he thought, with an effort to recall little girls he had seen—ah, how long ago it was that he had seen any!—"she 's most likely about twelve. She 'll be mighty pretty when she grows up."

His foot still hurt, cruelly, in consequence of his rash experiment, but fortunately they were at the rancho. A few moments later they had reached the casa, where Morgan Anderson took charge of his guest with skilful good-will. Like all cattlemen, he was fairly expert at attending to hurts; could set a bone, on a pinch, and it did not take him long to discover that one of the small bones of Gard's foot was dislocated. With Sandy Larch's aid he set the matter to rights, and bandaged the foot in a way that would have done credit to professional skill.

He would not hear of his patient's riding back to Sylvania that day.

"Not a bit of it!" he cried, when Gard proposed it. "That 's going to be one unmercifully sore foot by to-morrow; and suppose—"

He checked himself before voicing the suggestion that another accident might possibly put the foot badly out of commission. He had the plainsman's idea that a horseman should stay with his mount; so he merely said that he wanted to keep an eye on the foot.

"You can't be sure one of the little bones may not be broken," he explained, "and anyway, we 're mighty glad to see folks here; so I guess we 'll have to keep you." And Gard, more willing than at the moment he realized, accepted the invitation.

It was Manuel Gordo who, riding in from the upper range, saw the stranger's horse, lathered and excited, wandering afield, and threw a rope over him. When he got the bronco to the Palo Verde corrals and took off the saddle, he gave a low, comprehending whistle. Under the blanket, well back, but yet where a rider's weight would press, was a bit of cholla, the vicious fish-hook cactus of the desert, so disposed as to cause the horse exquisite pain.

Manuel swore a rolling Mexican oath as the thing caught his fingers, and stamped it into the desert before giving attention to the bronco's back. This, later, he showed to Sandy Larch, with a vivid explanation.

"The blame cowards!" the foreman commented. "So they thought they 'd git 'im that way, did they? It seemed mighty queer to me that he could n't sit anything four-legged he was likely to git in the ord'nary run, in Sylvania; but that pinto must 'a' raged considerable with that on its back."

"Who you think do-a that?" Manuel asked, and the foreman told him of the scene in the Happy

Family Saloon. "Some o' that gang 's been tryin' to get even," he finished, and Manuel growled assent.

"I—I see that señor before to-day," he ventured, hesitating, "He one good man."

"Where 'd you ever meet up with 'im?" demanded Sandy. "Where 'd he come from?"

"Quién sabe?" Manuel's shoulders lifted. "It is at Sylvania I see heem," he added, non-committally, and understanding dawned upon the foreman.

"You did, eh?" he laughed, "An' he got after you an' made you quit that spree you was headed on, I bet. That what you come home so quick for? How 'd he round you up?"

The Mexican grinned, shamefacedly, and Sandy laughed again.

"He 's sure a sin-buster," he commented, admiringly, "But he done you a good turn that time, Manuel. The *patron* 'd given me orders to everlastingly fire you next time you showed up after a spree, an' I 'd 'a' sure done it if you had n't 'a' been on hand that mornin' same 's usual!"

Manuel was busy smearing axle-grease on the bronco's back, to keep the flies from its hurts.

"The señor, he good man all right," he said, not turning around, and Sandy Larch, being shrewd, walked away without further comment.

CHAPTER IV

AS Morgan Anderson had predicted, the condition of Gard's foot next day was such as to make him a captive. The cattleman, surveying it after Jacinta had given the patient his breakfast, prescribed rest, and forbade any thought of leaving the rancho inside of a week.

"You say you came to see me on business," he said, as he stood looking down upon Gard where he lay in bed in a big, low-ceiled room of the casa, "Well, I 'm off to the upper range to-day, to pick out some work-cattle. I shall not be able to talk business till night; so that settles to-day."

"You 're mighty good," was Gard's reply, "but that business o' mine is only to ask you a question that you can answer in half a minute. You must n't think it 's some matter of consequence—to anybody but me, that is," he added.

"All right; so much the better. It 'll keep, and we can keep you."

Morgan Anderson had taken a liking to his un-

expected guest, and made him welcome with true western hospitality. It was long since Gard had talked with a man of his stamp, and the mere sound of Anderson's pleasant, easy voice was a joy to him. It was good just to lie there and listen; at the same time, he was concerned about his foot. He wanted to be up and about Kate Hallard's business. He had not calculated that the delivery of the deed which he had found in Arnold's coat-pocket two years before, would involve him as it had done.

He had come back to civilization with a strong purpose. He meant to make every effort to reinstate himself in the eyes of the law, and he realized that he must do all that he could before some chance recognition should work to hinder his efforts. Nevertheless, he told himself, the claim of this woman came first. Kate Hallard had no one to fend for her, and the responsibility, in this particular matter, had been laid on him, Gabriel Gard.

Later in the forenoon, when Anderson had ridden away with his men, Wing Chang, the Chinese cook, acting upon the *patron's* instructions, established Gard in a long steamer-chair, under the cottonwoods beside the casa. Hither, when he was settled, came Helen, bearing a little tray on which were biscuits and a grape-fruit. Gard smiled as he saw her coming around a corner of the

casa, and answered her greeting with a cheery "good-morning."

"I wondered where you 'd got to," he began, and stopped, suddenly, the quick color rushing to his face.

"Now I just beg your pardon, Miss," he stammered, in piteous confusion, "I mistook—I thought —I thought you were your little sister."

"I am," laughed Helen, putting the tray on a chair by his side.

"No, no: you must n't move your foot"—for Gard was struggling forward in his steamer-chair.

"If you do," she threatened, "I shall have to scold you harder than I did yesterday."

He sank back, a look in his face of mingled chagrin and wonder. Helen was arrayed in white, the simplest sort of a shirt-waist suit, with a touch of brown at neck and belt and shoes; but to his bewildered senses she was a radiant vision of unguessed daintiness and beauty. There was something incredible, to him, in the idea of this unearthly being offering him food. He glanced from her to the tray, and back again.

"I don't know what that is," he said, indicating the grape-fruit, "and I ain't sure I know what you are. I thought yesterday you were a little girl, and now you seem like a young lady; and I don't seem right sure you won't turn into a fairy in a minute, and run away."

"Oh, Oh!" Helen cried, "What three-fold flattery!"

Then it was her turn to experience a shock; for, as she stood looking down upon him, it suddenly became apparent to her that this man was young.

She had thought nothing about the matter, in the excitement of yesterday's encounter, and when she had walked beside him, seeing his bearded face in her brief, upward glances, she had taken it for granted that he was middle-aged, at least. There was something disconcerting about the unexpected revelation of youth in those eager brown eyes, in the clear olive of the face above the strong, short beard, and in the firm curve of red lips just visible under the moustache. She could think of no further retort to his pretty speech, and busied herself with showing him how to eat the grape-fruit, wondering, vaguely, where he could have been, in the desert, not to have encountered *pomelos.*

"These are from over the border," she explained. "One of the boys smuggled them in last week; think how wicked we are! But by New Year's we shall have some of our very own."

"They 're mighty good," Gard said, with no idea of what the fruit tasted like. He was still wrestling with the awesome fact that Helen had prepared it, and was teaching him to eat it. He took more sugar when she told him to, though years of absti-

nence from sugar had blunted his taste for it, and he shook his head with very proper commiseration when she told him of the way eastern folk spoil the fruit in preparing it.

"I never was back there," he said, "I was raised on the prairie; but this is good enough for me."

He looked beyond the fringe of cottonwoods, out across the plain, quivering in the mid-forenoon heat.

"Don't you like it?" he asked.

"I love it! It 's so big, and beautiful, in spite of its dreadfulness; it 's so *positive!*" Helen was sitting on the ground, her hands in her lap, her eyes turned toward the far mountains. Gard considered her words.

"Positive:" he repeated, thoughtfully, "Yes: it 's sure that. There ain't any half-way place," he added, drawing a deep breath. "A man, he gets big, or he gets little, living in it."

"Oh!" cried she; "you must have been a long time in the desert to find that out!"

She went on, with youthful, unconscious arrogance: "I 've lived here all my life; but I never realized that until after I came back from college this last time."

"Have you been here long?" she added.

"I have n't been 'round the level much," Gard answered, and after a pause he added:

"I 've been in the mountains most of the time."

"Then you must have been prospecting: I hope you struck pay dirt?"

"I did."

"Good! So you *are* a mining-man—I wondered."

She had wondered about him. Gard turned the thought over in his mind, the while he told her something of his discovery in the mountains. It seemed a marvelous thing that she should have thought of him at all. Almost unconsciously he began telling her of finding his claim; of working it; and of Jinny.

Helen listened with rapt interest. She knew that men did go off into the mountains as she supposed Gard must have done. She had talked with prospectors, in her lifetime, but never with one like this.

"I suppose you will be wonderfully rich when you begin working your claim in earnest," she said, at last, slowly, "Shall you like that?"

"I think so. There are some things I want a good deal"—Ah, how much he wanted them: the right to freedom; the right to hold up his head among men. Gard's desire for this was increasing with every moment that he sat talking to this fair, unconscious girl. As he looked at her, sitting before him on the sparse grass, it came home to him

with fearful force that it would be hard to have friends if his past life must always be a secret from them.

"I suppose there are," Helen was saying, half wistfully, "Money brings so many opportunities to a man."

"Not unless he 's a real man to start with," replied Gard.

"There 's a lot to be thought about," he went on. "I used to think that to give a man plenty to eat, and wear, and good things round him; nice, beautiful things such as we read about—and I guess that you 've always seen," he explained,—"would help make a better man of him.

"I don't believe it 's altogether so," he went on, following a train of thought that he had often mulled over, in the glade, "All the good things that you can put a man into won't make any better man of him, if when he did n't have 'em he was n't trying to make a better man of himself."

Helen pondered his saying in some surprise.

"I never thought of it that way before," she said, at last, "but it seems as if it ought to be true."

"I guess it 's true enough," Gard frowned a little, deep in thought. "Jinny and I, we used to figure out 't was, when we talked things over." He smiled into his companion's eyes.

"When I think, sometimes, of what men 'll do

for money, though," continued he, "I 'most feel 's if I did n't want any of it."

"But it seems cleaner money, somehow," Helen interrupted, "it 's different when a man digs it out of the earth. He does n't rob, or defraud anybody, then; and think of all it can do!"

"Yes." There was a slow twinkle in Gard's eyes as he spoke. "There 's solid satisfaction to me in thinking that one o' these days, if I want to. I can get Jinny a solid gold collar."

They laughed together over this bit of foolishness, feeling, suddenly, that they were very good friends. It was almost with a little sense of something unwelcome that Helen, looking across the level plain, saw a horseman in the distance, coming toward the rancho-gate.

"Some one is coming," she said, studying the approaching figure. "I wonder who it can be; Daddy is n't expecting anyone."

Gard turned his head and they watched together.

"It is n't one of the men," commented Helen. "He looks cityfied, does n't he?"

It was no careless cowboy figure that they watched. Whoever it was rode compactly, elbows down, and the horse was not running, but coming at an easy 'lope.

"Why!" the girl exclaimed, after a moment or two, "I believe it 's Mr. Westcott!"

The name set Gard's heart pounding, but he kept his quiet pose in the steamer-chair, and only the faintest flutter of distended nostrils betrayed the emotion that was surging within him.

He had no real fear that Westcott might recognize him. The lawyer, as it happened, had seen him but twice; once at Phoenix, just after his arrest, and again on the occasion of that memorable visit to Blue Gulch. Nevertheless, Gard was thankful that he was warned of the new-comer's approach.

"Do you know him?" Helen asked, still watching the rider, and Gard answered, promptly enough, that he had heard of him.

"He 's stopping at the corrals," said Helen, presently. "I hope there 's some one there to take his horse."

She started off, with a backward glance and a smile for her invalid, and presently Gard saw her going toward the corrals, followed by Wing Chang. She walked with a light, springing step that seemed to him must be peculiar to her alone. He had seen girls, back in Iowa, but they had not walked like that.

"There ain't anybody like her," he said, half aloud, replying to his own thought. Then he remembered that happy glance, and smile, and a shiver of pain ran through him.

"Heaven help me," he muttered, "She would n't have looked like that if she 'd known."

Helen, in the meantime, was greeting Westcott, who walked up to the casa with her, leaving his horse for Chang to unsaddle and turn in. He had come up to Sylvania to see a man, he explained, and when he got where the man was, why the man was not there. He showed his handsome, even teeth in a merry smile at his own jest, and somehow managed to convey to Helen the idea that the man "was n't there" for the reason that he was afraid to meet him, Ashley Westcott.

"It 's just a game of bluff some smart Aleck is trying to play on me," he added, with pleasant carelessness; "It is n't of much importance, except as it gives me the excuse I 'm always glad of, to ride out here. I shall have to wait over, a day or two, to give the fellow a chance to make good, I dare say."

His eyes narrowed when he was introduced to Gard. Kate Hallard had written to him, three days before, and the letter had brought him to Sylvania in a hurry. He had seen Mrs. Hallard and, therefore, Gard's name had significance for him.

He seated himself in the chair from which Jacinta had long since removed the tray, and made a casual inquiry about Gard's hurt. Gard explained it briefly, giving, to Helen's immense relief, none of the details.

"I was in Sylvania this morning," Westcott remarked, taking the glass of ice and the bottle of ginger ale that Jacinta brought him. "Came up from Tucson, and got that brute of a stage at Bonesta."

"It *is* a horrid ride," Helen commented.

Gard said nothing, and Westcott and Helen chatted indifferently for a few moments of matters common enough, the news and talk of the territory, yet as new to Gard, in large measure, as though he had been a foreigner. The lawyer turned to him again, irritated by his silent scrutiny.

"I saw your friend Mrs. Hallard in Sylvania," he said, "She was a good deal worried to know what had become of you."

Gard's eyes flashed, but his reply was given in a low, even tone.

"That was mighty kind of her," he said, "I calculated to be on hand—we reckoned you 'd be coming soon. When you go back you can ease her mind, and let her know I 'm all right."

Helen looked puzzled. She was not familiar with Sylvania, although it was the post office town of the rancho, but she knew, in a vague way, who Mrs. Hallard was. It would have been difficult not to know, when there were but half a dozen white women within a radius of fifty miles. She could not think of her, however, as a friend of this new ac-

quaintance. She had seen Mrs. Hallard once, and Westcott's apparently chance remark had exactly the effect he had calculated. It troubled her, and disturbed the atmosphere of friendliness which he had dimly felt between the girl and Gard, when he saw them together.

"It seems curious to find Mr. Gard here," the lawyer went on, addressing Helen. "He is just the man I came to Sylvania to see. You can bank on it I did not expect to meet him when I rode this way."

He overshot his mark, that time, going too far in his anxiety to produce an impression unfavorable to Gard. Helen's hospitality was touched, and her sympathy enlisted for her guest. Whatever his friendship for Mrs. Hallard, of whom she really knew nothing definite, she did not believe that the man who sat there regarding them both with serene eyes, would ever be afraid to meet Ashley Westcott.

She looked from one to the other, and Gard smiled as he answered the lawyer's remark, speaking to her rather than to the other.

"Yes," he said, "I 'm the man. I told Mrs. Hallard," he added, glancing at Westcott. "to tell you to see me."

"I shall, all right," the lawyer replied, pointedly, and turned to ask Helen some question about her father. She was glad of the diversion, and

went into detail about his errand to the upper range.

"We 're going to have an orchard," she explained, "Father had some trees put in three or four years ago; I believe he must have sat and held their heads all the while I was away, and watered them with a teaspoon."

The others joined in her laugh at the vision conjured up of Morgan Anderson playing nurse to desert trees.

"They are only a few grape fruit, and a date palm or two," Helen went on, "but they have kindled his ambition, and now he is planning for oranges, and apricots."

"Has he got the trees yet?" Gard asked.

"Mercy, no! Our needs are still more elemental than that. He has gone after some cattle to 'gentle' for plowing. Can't you just see those wild-eyed long-horns figuring in pastoral idyls on the plain?"

Westcott grinned, but before either man could comment Wing Chang appeared from the direction of the adobe structure that served him for kitchen, and beckoned Helen to a domestic conference.

"Wing Chang's official beck is equal to a royal summons," she said, lightly, "so I shall have to be excused for a season."

When she had departed the two men regarded each other for a little space. Westcott took out

paper and tobacco, offering them to Gard. The latter declined them and the lawyer began rolling himself a cigarette.

"I take it you 're an attorney, Mr. Gard?" he began, in a tone of careless query, as he struck a match.

At Gard's negative he held the little taper alight in his finger for an instant, while he stared in surprise.

"Oh," he said, recovering himself quickly, and lighting his cigarette, "I thought you must be. I rather figured,"—with a laugh which he meant to be irritating, "that you were a young attorney, or a new-comer in the territory, and trying to scare up business." He puffed a cloud of smoke into the air and regarded his companion through it, with veiled eyes. " 'T was rather natural, don't you think?" he persisted, with a sneer, "considering the nature of the little game up at Sylvania?"

Still Gard did not speak. He had put his well foot to the ground, and curled the other leg up that he might lean forward, and he sat regarding Westcott with quiet attention.

"I suppose you know, anyway," the latter finally said, with a very good assumption of contempt, "Anybody with a headpiece might, whether he 's a lawyer or not, that neither my client nor I need feel obliged to pay any attention to the matter."

Gard seemed to turn the remark over in his mind.

"Then what made you come up here?" he finally asked.

"That 's easy," Westcott answered, scornfully. "I wanted to see who was trying to make a fool of poor Kate Hallard. I don't wish her any harm, and I wanted to put her wise that she 's being used by some sharper, in a queer game."

"I guess you 'll think better o' that before we get through, Mr. Westcott," Gard said, with deliberation.

"Not much I won't." Westcott was admiring the rings he had blown into the air. "Fact is, my friend," he went on, with an air of easy confidence, "the more I think of your little scheme the less I think of it. In the first place, it won't work. My client is in possession. That 's nine points, you know. By way of a tenth point, he has a quit claim from Mrs. Hallard—"

"That 's one item," Gard interrupted, softly, "that I guess you won't care to dwell on, when the matter comes to be pushed."

"Pushed!" Westcott ignored the first part of the speech. "I tell you, man," he cried, "you 've got nothing that can *be* pushed! That deed you an' Kate Hallard pretend to have found has n't a leg to stand on. You 'd better be careful you don't get into trouble with it."

"I 'm going to, Mr. Westcott," the slow, calm tone made the lawyer feel uneasy, he could not have told why.

"If it will save you any trouble, my friend," he sneered, at the same time keeping a close watch on the other's face, "I 'll tell you that I saw some time ago, in a Chicago paper, that Jared Oliphant is out of commission—softening of the brain. I suppose you were n't banking any on him, though?"

"We 're banking on facts," was Gard's reply.

"And Sawyer 's skipped the country."

"Who 's Sawyer?" Gard's question came quick and sharp, nailing Westcott's blunder fast. The lawyer looked blank for an instant, then recovered himself.

"Why Kate Hallard seemed to think you were going to get some help through him," he lied; "but I know Sawyer. You can't do it."

"You must have known him," Gard said, "if you know he witnessed that deed; for Kate Hallard never told you."

Westcott stared out at the desert. He was playing a desperate game, and he knew it. He would have given much to understand the inscrutable man who sat opposite him. He did not feel that he did understand him, fully; nevertheless, he had his own theories of the stuff men are made of, and presently he leaned forward.

"Look here, Gard," he said, "This is mighty poor business for a man like you to be in."

He spoke rapidly; for Miss Anderson had just appeared at the door of the adobe kitchen, still talking to Wing Chang.

"I don't know what you expect to make by it," Westcott went on; "but I don't want Kate Hallard to get into any trouble. She can't establish that deed. It 's no more use to her than so much blank paper. But I 've got certain things in view. I 'm going into politics in this territory, and there are reasons why I don't want a thing like this coming up. You know how things get garbled—" He hesitated, and then went on, with a glance in the direction of the girl, who was now approaching.

"Between ourselves," he said, rapidly, "what 's the reason you and I can't do business together?"

He regarded his companion narrowly. Helen had stopped, near the casa, and was scanning the desert from under her hand.

"What do you say?" Westcott all but whispered. Gard looked at him a full moment before he spoke:

"I guess we could n't do business together," he said, slowly, "But I guess we shan't need to, Mr. Westcott; because you 're going to fix this matter up right. You 're going to give Mrs. Hallard back the property you stole from her, or else you 're going to pay her the full value."

"Or else?"

There was a battle of eyes between the two men. Westcott's flinched, finally, and sought the horizon.

"There ain't any other 'or else,'" Gard said, at last. "It 's going the way I stated."

Westcott had arisen, sneering, but before he could speak again Helen's voice broke in upon them:

"They 're coming!" she cried, joining her guests. "You 'd think they had a whole drove of cattle, from the noise."

A cloud of white dust far on the desert had resolved itself into a flurry of men, horses and cattle, coming in on a run. There was a thunder of hoofs, and a chorus of yells, and presently the "gentle" work-cattle were being herded into one of the corrals.

One of the horsemen separated himself from the group and rode on to the casa. This was Morgan Anderson, and he shouted greeting to Westcott as he swung from the saddle. He came into the shade of the cottonwoods firing a volley of genial questions, and giving bits of detail about the morning's work, until Helen reminded him that it was close upon dinner-time. That meal was taken at noon, at the Palo Verde, so Anderson excused himself to clean up. He was dusty and begrimed from the hot day's work. He carried Westcott off as

well, to remove the traces of his own long ride, and as Helen had already gone into the house, on some domestic errand, Gard was left alone.

The temporary solitude was welcome, and he lay back in the long chair half dizzied by the thoughts and memories that besieged his brain. Uppermost, for the instant, was an intense, grateful sense of relief. Westcott had so plainly not recognized him that he might consider one source of immediate danger to himself removed. He would probably be able to carry this business through with no other difficulties than lay in the matter itself.

There would be plenty of these. Westcott would see to that. He was evidently fully aware of the position he was in, and would let no scruples stand in the way of protecting himself.

"He 'll do just about anything—" Gard spoke half aloud, then checked himself, recalling that this was not the solitude of the glade.

"He 'll make a big fight," he thought, "both to keep the property and to escape being punished."

"Punished!"

The word came home to him with stunning force. The punishment for this crime, if Kate Hallard saw fit to press the matter, was jail!

And Kate Hallard would probably do what he advised.

Sudden fierce exultation leaped into the man's

heart. Beneath his quiet he had been deeply stirred by the encounter with Westcott.

"I wonder how he would like being in jail?" he thought, grimly, and brought himself sternly into line again.

"There ain't any right of way for me there. I must stop that," he whispered, the knuckles of his big hands white as wool under the strain of clasping his chair-arms.

The next instant he sat upright, staring out across the hot sand, but seeing only the vision of Helen's dainty maiden loveliness. The thought of his heart sent the blood from his face.

"I 've settled my account with Ashley Westcott," he muttered, "God knows I 've settled *my* account; but if that is what he 's aiming to do—"

He shivered, sinking back into his chair. Wing Chang was approaching with a tray of food.

"If that is what it is," Gard finished to himself, turning to greet the Chinaman, "Then I guess Mr. Ashley Westcott and I will have to open a new account; and he wants to look out."

CHAPTER V

TO Westcott's secret delight Morgan Anderson, going after dinner to see that his other guest had been properly served, found Gard fast asleep in the long chair.

"We 'll let him have his siesta out," said his host. "I don't suppose he got any too much sleep last night, with that foot. Helen, you and I can take Westcott to see the new corrals."

This arrangement was entirely to Westcott's pleasure. He knew, from past experience, that the cattleman would promptly become interested in some problem of the range, and leave his entertainment to Helen.

He strolled by her side as they made their way to the corrals, and put from his mind the uneasy thoughts that kept intruding. In spite of his defiance, he was horribly afraid of what Gard and Mrs. Hallard might be able to do. He did not know how they would move to establish the deed, but he was in a position that would make publicity

awkward. How he wished he knew where the paper had been found! To get any help from Oliphant he believed was out of the question, and he, himself, had been unable to find Sawyer. He was sure that Gard could not get hold of him; and if he should, he knew how to fix the fellow. He had one more card up his sleeve, and would play it, if Sawyer appeared.

But after this! He stole a glance at the girl walking beside him. He wanted money; he wanted power; he wanted position—to offer her. He was almost where he just now aspired to be on the political ladder. He had not tried for small things; he was after the District Attorneyship, and it was coming his way, now. Another year, and then, . . . by Heaven! Everything was going to be straight! There should be nothing that those clear gray eyes might not see!

But this matter must not come out! He would see Mrs. Hallard in the town while Gard was laid up. His career should not be ruined, just as he was getting where he could hold up his head and choose the straight path. He was weary in his soul of the other.

Helen looked up with a glance of inquiry.

"They seem to be long, long thoughts," she said, with a smile.

"They are," was the quick response. "I was thinking of my ambitions."

"If it were so, it were a grievous fault," she quoted, gaily.

"I don't think so!" He threw out his chest and looked down at her from his full height. "A man 's bound to have ambitions of some sort," he said, "They 're a measure of himself. Of course I have mine. I want the things I want when I can get them; but I want them, nevertheless, and I mean to have them."

"Such as a gold collar for your donkey?" Helen asked, enigmatically.

Westcott looked puzzled, but she did not explain.

"Not exactly that," he finally said, "If my donkey won't go without a gold collar I 'm sorry for him; because he 's going just the same. He 's got to carry me, 'For the good of the order.' This Territory needs men, Miss Anderson: and I mean to be one of the men that it needs."

"Oh! That is good!" Helen's sympathetic response quickened what Westcott, if he had characterized it, would have called his good impulse.

"There 's a lot that needs straightening out within our lines," he said, "And I want the chance to help in the work. At any rate, it 's not an ignoble ambition."

"Indeed it is not." Helen had never before seen Westcott in this mood, and she rather reproached herself that she did not feel a keener response. She felt that she had not done him justice.

"I am glad you think about those things," she told him. "Father talks to me, sometimes, and I know that he is often troubled. It seems as if every man is solely for himself. We need those who can see wrong in high places, as well as low; and who have courage to combat it."

Westcott felt a pang of wretchedness as he answered her frank glance. He realized that she would despise him if she knew some of things that he had done, and he winced in the realization. But he meant to leave all that behind. He would do something for Mrs. Hallard, and once he had won this splendid girl he would walk the open way. Heavens! What could a man not do, with such a helpmate!

A sudden sense of his own unworthiness brought unwonted humility into his heart. Ashley Westcott had never before, in his grown-up life, been so near to feeling a noble impulse.

"Miss Anderson," he said, "I 'm afraid I should never come up to any ideal of yours; but I aim to do as near right as I know how."

They were at the corrals now, where the cattleman, who had drawn ahead, was already talking to

Sandy Larch about some young horses that were to be got ready for shipment east, before spring. Polo ponies from the Palo Verde enjoyed a good market back in "The States."

In one of the corrals the future work-cattle were penned, half-a-dozen head, lean, leggy brutes, wild-eyed and ugly. They kept together, moving restlessly about in a bunch, watching the visitors sullenly, and occasionally lunging at one another with wide, wicked horns.

"They 're beauts, for fair," Sandy Larch remarked, "Only they can't seem to make up their minds to look it in public. They 're that kind o' modest vi'lets."

" 'T won't be exactly a Sunday school picnic to break them in." Westcott remarked, looking them over.

"Sure it will," said Sandy, impressively. "Why them cows will be door-yard pets, once they 're handled. Their bad looks is just a yearning for appreciation. That one, now—"

He tossed a little clod into the blazed face of one huge steer that had moved a little apart from the others. It was a vicious-looking brute, and stood lowing, sullenly.

"That there blaze-faced cow 'll be coaxing fer sugar out 'n your hand in a week's time, Miss Helen," Sandy declared. "Can't you see it in his eye?"

Helen could not see it, and said so, frankly. A cowboy, minded to reach the further corral, where the young horses were, sprang down into the inclosure with the cattle, and started across.

In an instant the big red steer came charging upon him, with mischief in his eye. The cowboy saw the brute, and dodging, made a rapid sprint for the nearest fence, clambering over it amid the derisive shouts of the spectators. The man's sudden scramble had brought him within a few feet of Westcott who, turning to look at him, made a gesture of recognition.

"Hullo, Broome!" he said: "I did n't know you were down here."

"Looks like I was on the spot," the fellow answered, "I bin holdin' it down fer about a week."

"I heard you went prospecting," Westcott continued, and Broome swore, under his breath.

"Came mighty near cashin' in that trip," he growled, and then he drew nearer, with a quick glance at the others, who were walking on toward the horse corral.

"Say, Mr. Westcott," he muttered, "Have you seen that there feller up 't the casa? Him with the hair *mat*tress on his face?"

"Do you mean Gard?" Westcott asked in amazement.

"Yep: that 's his name. Damn him an' it! I

met up with him on my 'tower.' He 's some buffalo now; but he was haired up like a bug-house billy-goat then. But say, Mr. Westcott: he 'd struck it rich; got a streak o' color that fair stunk o' gold, back in the mountains. I want to tell you 'bout it."

Westcott looked after his companions.

"I can't stop to hear it now, Broome," he said. "Shall you be round when I leave here? I 'll talk to you then."

"I 'm goin' to be workin' with the horses all the afternoon," Broome answered. "We 're goin' to be bustin' 'em out, an' that 's one o' my jobs."

He added the last with a good deal of pride, and Westcott nodded.

"I 'll see you, then," he said, moving off.

"Do you know Broome?" Mr. Anderson asked, when Westcott overtook the others.

"Pretty well"; was the reply. "I knew him up north. He was cow-punch for a friend of mine, and I used to be up there a good deal. He 's a good hand with horses."

"So he claims," Anderson said. "He blew in the other day, bragging that he 's a first class bronco-buster. We 're pretty short, so Sandy took him on. I don't think much of his looks."

"Oh, he 's all right." Westcott spoke carelessly. "A good many singed cats look worse."

Sandy Larch had gone up to the cook's quarters on an errand, and passing the casa found Gard awake.

"Hullo, Mr. Larch," the latter called, espying him.

"*Mister* Larch?" Sandy made a pretense of looking for the person addressed. "Where 'd you keep 'im?" he asked, with elaborate solicitude.

"Keep who?"

"*Mister* Larch."

"They ain't no such party hereabouts," he went on before Gard could reply. "Leastwise *you* don't know 'im. Dudes, an' Chinks, they nominates me *Mister* Larch; because the first don't know no better, an' the others they has to, er git busted good an' plenty. But to my friends I 'm Sandy."

"I believe it!" laughed Gard. "I guess your friends find you *all* sand, when they need the article."

Sandy looked at him with frank admiration.

"Say: now you 're shouting," he cried. "I like that there. Speakin' o' bouquets, you could n't 'a' handed me a prettier one if you 'd set still to think it up fer a week."

"Glad you like it," replied Gard. "I meant it to be liked."

"Like it? Say! you just combed my hair nice, did n't you? An' when you need someone to weigh out sand you just *buscar* me, Mr. Gard."

"No you don't; you drop that!" Gard looked stern.

"Drop what?" demanded Sandy, startled.

"Your *Mister* Gard. That rule of yours has got to work both ways, and *my* name is Gabriel."

There was a twinkle in the brown eyes; but Gard's tone was inflexible.

"Gabriel!" gasped Sandy. "Lord! How do you git off at it? Gabriel"; he repeated, "Shoot me if I can git a rope over that."

"Glory be!" A gleam of fun crossed his anxious face. "That name 's too long for every day," he said, "But I can fix it: I 'll call you Angel, if you like. Angel Gabriel. That 's great! That 's how we 'll fix it. Angel on week-days; Gabriel on Sundays, an' Angel Gabriel on Fourth o' Julys, an' when I 'm drunk. Angel Gabriel 's a first rate name fer a amachoor sin-buster to sport."

"You 'll drop that, too." Gard seized one of the cushions Helen had supplied his chair with, and hurled it at the cow-puncher. "Don't you go making fun of my name when I 'm down," he cried. "Sandy, you 've got to call me Gard."

He held out his hand and Sandy grasped it, cordially.

"I like you, Gard," said he, with quick seriousness. "We 're partners for fair if you say so. If you need friends, as I expressed a while back,

you 'll know where to look fer one of 'em; you won't fergit it?"

"Never," Gard said, heartily, and Sandy drew back. The others were coming up from the corrals.

"I never was hard on any man unless I thought he needed it, Gard," remarked Sandy, looking toward them. "But that there Westcott—well I 'll be damned if I kin 'go' him. He can rope 'n hogtie the law, 'n brand it ten different ways while you 're lookin' one; but I bet he ain't always goin' to git away on time.

"Say, Gard: he 's mighty sleek to look at, an' women like sech; but if I thought he was likely to git a rope over our pretty filly there—damned if I would n't wanter let a little daylight through 'im."

So Sandy, too, had his fears. Gard's eyes narrowed as he surveyed the approaching group.

"Shucks, Sandy!" he exclaimed. "You want to keep away from the loco patches, man. He could n't do it!"

The thought of Helen's frank, pure eyes put unnecessary emphasis into his speech; but Sandy was pleased.

"Good talk!" he cried, with a long breath of relief. "Guess I 'm some of an old fool; but I 've seen the little gal grow up from that high," measuring an incredibly short distance above the desert,

"An' you put in a pin where I tell you, Gard: that there Westcott 's a tarantula an' a side-winder all into one; an' some day you 'll know it."

"I guess that 's no lie, Sandy." Gard's face was pale, and his eyes wore a strange look. He spoke very low; for the others were coming within earshot.

"Guess I 'll mosey along," the foreman said. "I come a driftin' up here after some hog-grease, an' I 'll have to *buscar* Chang fer 't."

He walked off in the direction of the kitchen as the others began talking to Gard. Half an hour afterwards Anderson was waving *adios* to Westcott, from the great rancho gateway.

The attorney rode out on the desert, glorious in the afternoon light, and taking a wide sweep turned back by way of the corrals. A cow-puncher who had been squatting against one of the fences, waiting, got up as he came in sight, and shuffled out to meet him.

"What did you want of me, Broome?" Westcott asked at once.

Broome lounged up against the fence, his hands in his pockets.

"I been playin' in a hell o' luck lately, Mr. Westcott," he said.

Westcott made a move as if to ride on.

"If it 's nothing but a hard luck story," he began.

"No, no. It ain't." Broome laid a restraining hand on the pony's mane.

"I want ter know who that feller is up yonder." He jerked his head toward the casa, at the same time characterizing Gard after a manner entirely to his own mind.

"I don't know him from a hole in the post," Westcott said, with great apparent candor. "What makes him get on *your* nerves so?"

"He give me the double cross an' the grand throw-down, sure, all in the same shuffle," Broome said, with a snarl.

"Where was that."

"Sommers in the mountains. I was lost in the desert; pretty near cashed in, an' I met up with this feller. He took me inter camp, hell of a outfit. Everything made outer nothing, same 's a Papago where they ain't no settlement handy. He was eatin' tree beans, an' shootin' game with a bow-arrer, an' he had all sorts o' scare-crow Bible verses wrote up round like a Sunday school. Sufferin' snakes! You never see the beat of it!"

"I don't know as I ever want to," Westcott said, impatiently. "Drive on, Broome."

"I 'm a drivin'. Gimme time. Say, Mr. Westcott: the cuss 'd struck it rich up there, like I told you. Got a vein o' yeller laid open like a roarin' buttercup."

"Got it staked and located, too, I suppose," the lawyer said, with a sneer. "Bite it off, Broome: what are you driving at?"

"I tell you I *am* bitin' it off," was the sullen rejoinder. "I tell you there 's gold to burn up there. It 's the damndest, likeliest place you ever see."

"Why did n't you prospect a little too?"

"Prospect!" Broome swore, savagely.

"That there locoed buffalo he tried to kill me, when he found I 'd discovered the vein. He 'd took me up the trail clean dopy, an' he brought me down blindfold, with my hands tied, on the back of a damned little she-ass; so I would n't know how to git back there."

"Oh," Westcott jeered. "And what you want of me is to take you by the little hand and lead you back there and let you dig?"

"No I don't neither! I got a good scheme, an' I want ter let you in on it. You done a lot fer me, once, Mr. Westcott."

"You bet I did," was Westcott's response. "You owe me the price of your own neck, whatever that may be worth to you; but I can't see where you 're going to pay it out of this scheme."

"I 'd a done it all right by now if that feller had n't nearly killed me," Broome said.

"Why did n't he quite kill you if he wanted to?" asked Westcott, incredulously.

"Hell! *I* dunno," was the frank admission; "I 'd a done him good an' plenty, you bet; but he did n't, an' here I am."

Westcott sat his horse, waiting, with an elaborate assumption of patience.

"Here 's what I 'm thinkin' of," began Broome, talking fast. "I 'm busted, Mr. Westcott: I ain't got even a bronc o' my own; but if I c'd git anybody to grub-stake me, I 'd go up the railroad to where Gard left that burro—I know the place all right—an' I 'd git 'er; I 'd know 'er by a big scar on one shoulder. An' you bet the hash once she was out on the desert she 'd strike fer that there camp in the mountains. She 's that kind. He tamed her out o' the wild, he said, an' she never knowed no other place."

"Then what would you do?"

"Be Johnnie on the spot," replied Broome. "Git in an' dig. In the same place, mebby."

"Do you mean jump it?" The question was put in a low tone.

"I ain't sayin' what I mean; but I mean all 't 's necessary to git back the rights that feller done me out of."

Westcott considered, looking thoughtfully out on the desert.

"It 's risky," was his comment, at length.

"I ain't askin' *you* to risk it," growled the other.

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"All I want o' you 's a grub-stake, an' I 'll divvy fair."

"I should advise you to." The quiet voice was full of meaning.

"I will, fer fair. Will you do it?"

"I 'll think about it"; Westcott spoke in an ordinary tone. "There may be a fair prospecting chance in it," he continued. "I 'll see you again. I would n't do any talking if I were you," he added.

Broome regarded him with sullen scorn.

"Think I 'm a damned tenderfoot to go shootin' off my mouth?" he demanded.

The lawyer made no reply as he rode away, while Broome went back into the shade. Wing Chang, darting around a corner of the fodder-sheds, to make sure which way he turned, came face to face with Sandy Larch, walking in the direction of the horse-corrals, his surprised eyes following Westcott's vanishing figure.

"Mistlee Westclott," said Chang, noting the foreman's interest. "Him an' Bloome have long talkee-talkee out there, allee samee heap chin-chin."

"So do you, you heap heathen," replied the foreman. "What you doin' down here?"

The Chinaman grinned, full of friendliness.

"Sam Lee kid say you come look see for hog

lard when me gone. When come back I bling him."

He held out a broken bean-pot containing the desired article. Sandy Larch took it, sniffing it critically.

"Good boy, Chang," he said, in approval. "And you just remember this that I tell you: Broome an' Mr. Westcott, they 've most likely bin arrangin' a series o' Salvation Army joss meetings, fer to convert all you Chinks. Sabbee dat?"

"Me sabbee."

"All right, then; you just sashay back an' git on your cookin' job. That 's all."

He put a broad hand on the Chinaman's shoulder and turned him about.

"Allee lightee," Wing Chang said, and went his way, smiling, inscrutably.

CHAPTER VI

"I 'm sure you ought to have stayed longer," Helen Anderson said. "Such a hurt as you had *can't* be well by now."

Gard, from the saddle, thrust forth his hurt foot and moved it about.

"It *has* got well, first rate," said he, meditatively. "Your father can sure get his certificate off me, any day."

He spoke lightly, not glancing at the upturned, troubled face. He spoke truthfully. His foot was well on the road to recovery, but he knew, in his heart of hearts, that he was running away from the Palo Verde, and that his resolution to do so was not very strong.

"It 's the first time you have been on a horse since that day," Helen continued. "Would n't you do better to go in the buckboard, after all?"

He knew that hers was but the solicitude of the hostess; but the kindly interest of her tone was like nectar to him. It drew his eyes to hers, which

suddenly sought his stirrup. Gard pulled himself up with a jerk.

"I 'll be all right," said he, with a sudden stiffening of voice and manner. "I ought to 've gone before."

She drew back, a little coldly.

"It 's too bad you 've been detained," she said, and he could not bear it.

"It ain't that," he said, quickly. "I 'd like to stay. I don't know how to tell you how I 'd like to stay. But I 've got to go. And anyway, I must be in Sylvania soon 's possible. There 's a heap of things I 've got to do. I—"

He realized that he was getting beyond bounds, and was glad that Morgan Anderson came up from the corrals just then.

"Here 's your last chance, if you want to change your mind and go in the buckboard," the cattleman called.

The buckboard, with a team of broncos driven by one of the men, was already driving away. Strapped at the back was Gard's suit-case, which Anderson had insisted upon having brought out from the hotel in Sylvania. Gard felt quite sure that he preferred to ride, and Anderson gave it as his opinion that that was the best way to travel.

"Better 'n railroad trains, or automobiles," he declared, and quoted, as a clincher to his opinion,

"'A good man on a good horse is nobody's slave.'"

Gard had been at the rancho five days; five wonderful days, they were to him, and he felt that he dared not stay another hour. The cattleman had not been able to help him much, on the business that had been his errand to the Palo Verde. Ashley Westcott had been diligent in seeking, a couple of years before, to learn what had become of Sawyer, after he acknowledged the Oliphant deed to Ed Hallard; but it had never occurred to him to mention the young notary to Morgan Anderson.

Curiously enough, however, the first person whom Gard had asked about the notary, after learning of Mrs. Hallard's trouble, had referred him to the cattleman. It was this fact that had brought him out to the Palo Verde.

Anderson remembered the young fellow. Sawyer had "developed lungs" in Sacramento, and had come down to the desert in search of health. He had got better, Anderson knew, and had "gone back inside"—he thought to San Francisco. He gave Gard the address of a correspondent of his own in that city, who might, he thought, be able to furnish Sawyer's address.

"I wish I could have helped you more in what you wanted to know," Anderson said, shaking hands with his guest. "But you come out again

while you 're down this way, and maybe we 'll have better luck all round."

Gard thanked him, and with another word or two to Helen, rode away. Anderson stood watching him, long after the horse and rider had become a mere speck on the yellow desert.

"There 's something awfully likable about that chap, Sis," he remarked to the girl at his side. "But he puzzles me, too."

"Yes?" Helen answered, absently, and her father glanced at her quickly.

What he saw seemed to reassure him. She was bending over Patsy, whose paw had come into painful contact with prickly pear.

"That means, little dog," she told him, "that you will have to stay at home."

She searched the hurt member to make sure that the thorns were all out.

"Yes"—she was still bent over Patsy's foot as she answered her father's remark—"he *is* likable. . . . There, Patsy, don't make a fuss." She bound up the paw in her handkerchief.

"I do not know that he puzzled me," she went on, straightening up. "I thought he seemed rather lonely, though."

"He 's not likely to be that, long," was Anderson's reply. "It 's a thundering pity, too. I understand he 's in deep with that Hallard woman,

though I 've tried not to believe it. She don't seem his kind. I asked him to come here again," he went on, a little ruefully; "and yet I 'm not sure I meant it."

"What kind of woman is this Mrs. Hallard, Father?" Helen regarded her father now, with interest in her level grey eyes.

"Why," Anderson said, doubtfully. "She 's not the kind I should think would catch him. It 's a case of catch, all right, though, I guess; even Westcott seemed to know about it."

He considered a moment, frowning.

"She 's loud, and coarse, I suppose; but she 's a mighty handsome woman, if a man don't care about some other things. And I somehow should think Gard would. I like a different sort, myself."

He glanced proudly at the figure beside him. Helen was in her riding-habit, waiting for her horse to be brought round.

"But she—she 's only a rough kind, is all you mean, is n't it?" Her face flushed, ever so little.

"Oh, Kate Hallard 's a decent sort, all right enough, I dare say," Anderson hastened to answer. "Of course there 's always talk. I 've heard some myself, but I discounted it. In the first place, she 's hard as nails. No nonsense about her. Not her. Her tongue 's tipped with vitriol, and when she opens her mouth the men

catch it." Anderson shrugged his shoulder a trifle.

"And then, of course," said he, "There 's no telling about Gard. He may be a little more attracted than he might want to be, and yet have strength enough to pull out of it and get away."

"I should call that being weak, if he cared!" cried Helen, indignantly.

"Oh, I don't know." Her father took Dickens' bridle-rein from the puncher who had brought the pony up.

"It all depends upon how a man looks at some things," he said, throwing the reins into place.

Helen took them and prepared to mount, a hand on the cantel.

"The one thing I don't like about this way of riding," said Anderson, "is that it curtails our privileges. You don't need helping on."

Helen sprang to the saddle, adjusting herself with a little shake.

" 'T would only hinder," said she, smiling, "like every other help we don't need."

She flushed suddenly, as she realized that she was quoting a saying of Gard's.

"You keep Patsy here, won't you?" she called as she rode away, leaving her father looking after her with an expression half proud, half wistful and wholly tender.

"She 's clean grown up," said he, to himself, as he stooped and snapped the leash into Patsy's collar.

"The bonnie thing! Lord! How I wish her mother was alive!"

He stood staring out upon the sun-washed desert, wide, silent, baffling, and spoke the yearning thought of his heart.

"I don't know how to be a mother to her, and she 's sure going to need one. Lord, Lord!" He cast a comprehensive glance over the fierce, brilliant landscape. "This is an all-right country for men and burros," he said, with a half-whimsical sigh, "but it 's a mighty hard one for women and horses!"

Helen had promised Jacinta to ride as far as Old Joe Papago's, to see Mrs. Old Joe about a young Indian girl who was to come and help Jacinta with the work of the casa. Old Joe was better off, financially, than any other Papago in the section, and his wife, who was reputed to have some Spanish blood, exercised a sort of guardianship over the women and young girls of their settlement. This latter was only three or four miles distant, and there was a slight ting in the December air that quickened Dickens' nerves, and made him ready for a frolic, but Helen was in no mood to gratify him. She ignored all his in-

vitations to run, and kept him to the slow little walk of the bronco.

He hated it and fretted under the steady rein; but for once Helen did not heed him. She was going over in her mind the events of the past five days. Westcott, in the brief space of his hour with her, had sought to sow the seeds of doubt of Gard in her mind. He had spoken vaguely of certain tricky games that the stranger was trying to play upon him, and an imagination less pure than the girl's might have inferred much from the subtle little that he let fall regarding Kate Hallard.

The carefully chosen seed, however, had found no favoring soil—no fostering care. Helen was herself of too true and sturdy a fiber to doubt the truth and the stability of Gard's nature. She dismissed, with hardly a thought, the suggestion of trickery on his part, and the other poisoned arrows wholly missed their intended mark.

"There 's a lot of ways of thinking about any one thing," Gard had said one day, as they talked out long, long thoughts of life, and right, "But a man—he 's got to follow the straightest path he sees; for he 's got to live so he can like himself, and care to be with himself."

Yes: that was what he would do, without fail. He saw straight, and he would follow the straight path. Oh! It was good to feel trust in one's

friends! Something of the peace and serenity that Gard himself had won out of solitude and despair fell upon her spirit at thought of his clear vision, and steady holding of the right.

Yet her heart was heavy. She told herself that this was because she feared for the ultimate happiness of one friend. She remembered her father's words about Mrs. Hallard: "coarse; hard; her tongue tipped with vitriol." Surely they must be unjust, or this man, who was fine and true, would not care. He *could* not care. Perhaps he would come to see before it was too late, and would "pull out and get away." But no: that he would not do. His was a steadfast nature; of that she was sure!

BEFORE Old Joe Papago's door, reins dropped to the sand, stood a stout roan horse, and leaning against the door-post, talking to Mrs. Old Joe, was a woman dressed in khaki. It needed but a single glance to tell Helen who it was.

The blonde head turned as the girl rode up, and the big black eyes surveyed her comprehensively, but there was no sign of recognition in the hard, impassive face. Mrs. Old Joe grunted a response to Helen's greeting, and the latter dismounted.

Acting upon a sudden impulse she came close to the woman by the doorway.

"Good-morning," she said, simply, holding out her hand. "This is Mrs. Hallard, is n't it? I am Helen Anderson."

"Pleased to meet you," Mrs. Hallard said, apparently not seeing the outstretched hand. Kate Hallard had no mind to be patronized: but she studied the girl's face, stealthily, and the bold eyes grew a shade softer.

She did not know that Gard had left the Palo Verde that morning. Westcott, who had tried hard to come to some sort of terms with her, in the other man's absence, had told her that the latter would probably let himself be detained at the rancho for a fortnight, at least. He had drawn a vivid picture of Gard making the most of this opportunity to win a way into Miss Anderson's good graces. The lawyer's methods had been primitive. He sought to play upon the woman's presumable capacity for jealousy, and thus set her against Gard.

He might have saved himself the mental wear and tear. Kate Hallard was not a fool; nor a devotee of the heart-complication school of fiction. She held no illusions about Gard's attitude toward herself, and she had come to believe in him, passionately. Nevertheless, Westcott's efforts had awakened in her a keen interest in Helen.

"I expect you are on the same errand as my-

self," the girl was saying, determined not to be repulsed. "Mrs. Joe keeps all the girls in her *reboso*."

She spoke in Spanish, that the Indian woman might not feel left out of their talk, and the latter smiled, toothlessly.

"My, no!" exclaimed Mrs. Hallard. "You don't catch me taking on girls to look after. I 'm on the *buscar* for a boy."

"And have you succeeded?"

"Not I! They ain't lookin' for work; not the bucks; an' she would n't trust me with a girl, not even if I 'd take one."

She laughed, defiantly, and the young girl divined, instinctively, that she did so because she was ill at ease. She stood looking at her, wistfully.

Did Gabriel Gard really love this woman? Was she really coarse, and hard, and vitriolic of tongue, as her father had said? It could not be; or such a man could not care. There *must* be another side, and shame be upon her, Helen Anderson, if she could not win it to the surface.

"I wonder—" she began, with some hesitation. "Of course I don't know what you want, but Wing Chang, our cook, has a young cousin—or something—visiting him. He came a few days ago, with some teamsters from the mines. I think

Chang does not want to take him on. He was scolding about it, yesterday."

The defiance was gone from Mrs. Hallard's face, and a little look of friendliness crept among its hard lines.

"Why, if he 's old enough to wait on table," said she, "I dare say he 'd be just what I want."

"Oh," Helen replied, "I know that he can do that. He must be about sixteen years old, and he *has* waited in restaurants." She did not add that that was one reason why neither she nor Chang cared for the lad's services. "Why can't you ride back to the rancho with me and see him yourself?" she asked, instead.

"Why, I 'd take it right good of you if I could," Kate Hallard said, after a moment's hesitation. Mrs. Old Joe had departed to find the mother of Jacinta's prospective handmaiden, and they were speaking English.

" 'T ain't no meanness in me that won't have a girl round," she added, as if wishing to set herself right with her hearer, "but I want some one to sling victuals, at the grille, an' I can't have any half-baked girl-squaws round. Men 's devils; I can't look after them an' girls too."

"Oh!" Helen spoke in impulsive protest, and Mrs. Hallard's laugh was hard again.

"You don't believe what I said about men, I

guess," she said, and Helen answered very simply:

"Of course not; it could n't be true you know, so long as women are not—what you said."

"I ain't so sure about the women—not most of 'em—" Mrs. Hallard's handsome face wore a sneer now.

"Anyway," she argued, "they 's plenty of 'em doin' their share o' the devil's business in the world."

"But there *are* good men," Helen persisted, "and good women, too."

"Right you are about there bein' some," was the reply; "but I draw the line at there bein' many. I 've lived in this world thirty years, nearly, child, an' I ain't found such a lot. I know *one* good man though."

Her face softened, and at the sight a thrill stirred Helen's pulses. She felt sure that Mrs. Hallard was speaking of Gard. There *was* softness under that hard shell after all.

Before she could say anything more, however, Mrs. Old Joe returned to the hut with the Papago girl and her mother, and she set her mind to the faithful performance of Jacinta's errand. It was quickly arranged that the handmaiden should be brought at once to the Palo Verde, and the matter completed, the two white women rode away together.

A soft wind was blowing across their faces; a wind full of the essential odor of the desert: impalpable, a little acrid, bracing withal, and subtly suggestive of mystery, and of vastness. Helen threw back her head, yielding to the desert spell.

"Oh!" she cried, "this is the place to be, after all. Don't you feel so about it?" she demanded of her companion.

"I don't know," Kate Hallard was watching her, puzzled. "I never was away from it. Sometimes it makes me ache."

"Ache?" It was the girl's turn to be mystified.

"Yes." The woman could not have told why the hidden thoughts of her heart suddenly became articulate at this girl's invitation to speech.

"It always seems to me as if the desert—wants something," she explained, hesitatingly. "I d' know what 't is, but the feeling 's there: a sort of emptiness, as if it wanted to cry and could n't. Sometimes at night, when I hear a burro 'yee-haw,' or a coyote howlin', seems to me like 's if, if the desert *could* cry that 's the kind o' noise it would make. It 's like lonesome women—if there 's any sense in that!" she added with a half-ashamed laugh.

Helen's heart was full of sympathy that she felt was but partially understanding. So this was what the desert had brought to this hard-seeming woman.

She had a sudden sorry realization that the marvelous waste had never told its ache to her, dearly as she loved it, and with the realization came the knowledge that the woman beside her understood because she had truly lived and suffered in it. It came to her to wonder if Gard had ever felt the ache of the desert.

"Do you ever want to get away from it?" she asked, softly.

"I d' know," her companion considered.

"I ain't never known what anything else is like," she finally said, helplessly, "but seems to me you git to feel like 's if you was part of the desert, an' something would break if you got too far off."

Ah! *That* Helen knew. She had hungered for the desert, even if she had never ached with it.

"It 's the place of places for me," cried she, taking off her hat and letting the wind stir her hair.

Kate Hallard studied her, wonderingly. She had known few women in her life; never before so youthful a one. She wondered what Gabriel Gard had thought of this girl.

"Mr. Gard 's at the rancho ain't he?" she asked, and Helen's cheek paled for an instant. The older woman noted the fact with a fierce little pang.

"He went back to Sylvania this morning," Helen answered, and the other looked her surprise.

"I did n't suppose he 'd git away so quick," she

said. "Sandy Larch was in yesterday an' said he was in for another week. If I 'd known he was comin' in I would n't a' gone off," she added, and a sense of the desert's ache crept into Helen's own heart.

Yes: Mrs. Hallard was right: it *was* a lonely place.

ARRIVED at the Palo Verde, the girl called Wing Chang, telling him the business of the moment, and directed him to send in his young relative. Then she took Mrs. Hallard to her own room, a big, low-ceilinged place, with wide windows looking out toward the far mountains. Kate gazed about her wistfully. She had seen few women's rooms in her life-time.

This one was the sort of composite suggestion of dear girl and nice boy that the modern college girl's room is apt to be. Cushions blazoned with the initials of Radcliffe and of Harvard heaped a couch covered with the skin of a mountain lion that Helen herself had shot. Among the pretty trifles on the dresser was a practical-looking little revolver, and from one of the two hooks that held her light rifle hung an illumined panel bearing the arms of Radcliffe. A cartridge-belt hung from another hook, and beneath it, on a stand, lay a bit of dainty embroidery which she had been working on that very morning.

Beside it was a fat little book bound in age-yellowed vellum. Kate Hallard picked this up and glanced through it, curiously.

"Is this Chinese?" she asked, bewildered.

Helen explained that it was Greek, and the woman laid it down with a weary little laugh.

"I ain't never been out 'n the territory, as I said," she explained, half defiantly. "Men 's about the only books I ever read, an' Lord! *they 're* mostly writ plainer 'n that."

"I have n't known many," Helen answered, "except my father—and one or two others."

"One or two 's likely to be samples o' the rest," the other remarked, carelessly. "I suppose you know an awful lot?" she continued, glancing at Helen's book-shelves. She had never before seen so many books together.

"I know just enough to realize that I am dreadfully ignorant." Helen's face was troubled; the older woman yearned toward her. She, alas! could think of nothing in her own experience that was likely to be of use to the girl.

Wing Chang's cousin just at this instant appeared, silently, in the doorway.

"Oh, Lee," Helen cried; "Mrs. Hallard wants to see you."

"Chang say come," the boy replied, "I come quick 's could. Me velly good waiter boy," he

added without preamble, turning to Kate Hallard. "Thinkee takee your job."

"Land sakes!" laughed she; "he 's none so slow, is he?"

"Can you wait on customers as prompt as all that?" she asked of the boy.

"Me velly good boy," he repeated, gravely, "makee hash fli allee same like hellee."

"Lee!" Helen looked shocked. "You should wait to see whether Mrs. Hallard wants you," she finished, rather tamely.

Lee looked at her in surprise. "No can help," he announced, conclusively, "China boy velly scarce; no can get many; him got take me; one velly good boy." He glanced again at Mrs. Hallard.

"I go get clo'," he concluded, imperturbably. "Go skippee Sylvania. See you later."

He was gone, without circumlocution, and Helen surveyed her visitor a little helplessly. "I 'll have Chang talk to him," she said.

"No need," laughed the other. "But my! He 's sure something of a hustler, that boy. I reckon I 'd better hit the trail or he 'll be runnin' the grille before I git to it."

"Do you really think he will do for you?" Helen was somewhat dismayed.

"Sure," was the reply. "He 'll do first rate. He means well; don't I know Chinks?"

"You have to take 'em the way they mean," she added, philosophically. "That 's the way to git along with 'em."

"You seem to know a great deal," murmured Helen, wistfully. She felt somehow very young and inexperienced.

"I suppose you 'll see Mr. Gard when you get home," she added, tentatively. "We—that is—Father was afraid he ought not to go so soon—on account of his foot. We hope it will be all right."

Again Kate Hallard crushed down the little pang that would come.

"Mr. Gard, he took hold of a little piece o' business for me . . . " she spoke very casually, "I reckon it 's bothering him a lot. I expect he wants to get done with it an' git away from here. He 's been mighty kind about it."

"Oh! He would be that." Helen could not have explained why her heart seemed suddenly lighter. She was conscious of a quick, friendly feeling toward this woman of the desert.

"You 'll come again to see me, won't you?" she asked, detaining her guest when the latter had swung to the saddle.

Kate Hallard hesitated. "I reckon I can't git away from the grille much," she said, evasively. "I never go nowhere much."

The girl's instinctive wisdom prompted her not

to press the point then. She would let it wait, but her wistfulness sounded in her voice when she spoke again.

"At any rate we 're friends, are we not?" queried she, looking up into the black eyes.

They returned her gaze with a sudden glisten, as of ice-bound pools when Spring has touched them. In their fundamental honesty the two natures stood for the moment upon common ground.

"Friends." Kate Hallard drew a long breath as she took up her bridle-rein. "Child," she said, "if the friendship of a woman like me is ever any use to you, it 's yours while there 's a drop o' blood in my heart," and ere Helen could make answer she was well down the avenue toward the great gate.

CHAPTER VII

THE days immediately following his return to Sylvania were hard ones for Gard. The few cautious inquiries he had dared to make in the investigation of his own affairs had resulted in the information that Jim Texas was dead and that Hart Dowling had left Wyoming and gone on into Idaho. Gard's messenger had been unable to get to him on account of the deep snow.

He read the letter containing this news lying coatless upon the sand, far beyond the town. The desert was his one solace in the enforced idleness of waiting for word from Sawyer, for which he had written to San Francisco. The vast barren seemed in tune with his own mood.

The fierceness of his ache was there; the yearning of his solitude: he tried to picture the vast sea of sand overgrown with verdure, calling up cool visions of tree and pool, and gentle growths born of the small spring rain on the green grass. The

picture came before him like a memory of delicious holidays in lush woods.

It was but a vision however. The scent of the desert was in his nostrils; the impress of the desert upon his brain. He opened his eyes and saw again the silent reaches of the waste—wide, untamed, untamable—and sat up, the better to view the lean landscape.

At his first movement a jack-rabbit, observing him from beneath a cholla, gathered its swift hind-legs under him and fled, with incredible rapidity, before the shadow of fear. Gard laughed, but there was underneath his amusement a sense of the constant deadly strife of the place. If he had no designs upon the jack-rabbit, plenty of other creatures had. The lurking snake that lay in wait to take him subtly; the lank coyote, more cunning than he, if not so swift; even the Gila monster, slow and hideous; the savage, sneaking wild-cat, and the little hydrophobia skunk, were constantly on the alert to surprise those wide-open eyes and ears. These all preyed upon him, and upon one another, caught in the endless struggle of the desert, moved upon by constant need to sustain life, and to hold it against all other life.

The thought brought Gard to a sharpened sense of his own danger, and of the enemies who, if they but knew, would be so quick to hunt and harry him.

The savagery of it all smote him with a keener desolation. The armed vegetation, grotesque and menacing; the preying creatures of the plain; the sand-laden wind that was constantly tearing down and rebuilding the shifting scene—were not all these but a commentary upon the mad, devouring human world about him?

But the wind that laid bare the earth's nakedness clothed and healed as well, purifying the air and cleansing the waste. The give as well as the take of life was there. Death was in the desert, but not decay. Gard, feeling it all in the whirl of his emotions, knew that the grim plain which mothered the whole fierce brood had mothered him as well, giving him back health and strength from her own burning heart, and he loved her, as her children must.

His thoughts turned inevitably to the glade. He had a whimsical idea that his trouble would all seem easier if he could but talk it over with Jinny. Deep down, however, he knew better. Not even to that faithful listener could he have voiced the longing of his whole nature for Helen Anderson. He cherished the thought of her in his secret heart, going over, minute by minute, the hours they had spent together. Each word of hers, each look, gesture, had its special power of endearment!

What if he were to tell her the whole story, would she believe him? Would she consent to go

away with him into a new life? He could realize enough from the mine to make such a life full of rich possibilities, and there were far countries enough!

But what sort of a man would it be, who could ask the woman he loved to help him live a lie? He asked himself the question and awoke to a realization of his further folly. What right had he even to dream of her—to imagine that she could ever care for him at all? Even though he should stand before her without a shadow in his past he would be a brave man who dared raise his eyes to her. How could he, of all men?

Then he remembered Westcott. He had seen with his own eyes that *he* dared. Could that man ever hope to win her?

The torture of this thought drove him out over the desert at noon, when the sky closed brassy-yellow above him, and the heat-reddened air over the sand seemed the hue of his own thoughts. He fought his way through it to peace, far out in the open, when the afternoon wind was driving the heat of the plain skyward, and seaward over the mountains, and he came back against that cleansing breath, his wonted strong self, to a conference with Kate Hallard. She was bitter against Westcott that day, breathing out wrath, and the desire for vengeance.

"If you 've ever noticed it," Gard said, "there 's a kind of reasonableness in the way things happen, even when they look black. They happen out of each other; and there 's Something managing them, no matter how it looks, sometimes. I 've found that out."

"I 'd like to help in the managin' " Mrs. Hallard said, grimly.

"You could n't." Gard shook his head thoughtfully.

"You could n't see the whole scheme," he continued. "And we don't need to want to. Whoever 's doing it is making up a whole piece out of 'em. That 's this world we 're in. It 's our world. We belong in it; and there ain't anything in it for us to be afraid of but just ourselves."

He pondered his own saying for a moment, repeating it as if to reassure himself.

"That 's sure right." He took up the thread again.

"It makes me think of a game I played once at a party I went to, when I was a kid, back in the states. They had a big, round paper apple fixed up, with something in it for each of us; and we each had a string given us to follow up till we came to the end and each found what belonged to him. Ever see anything like that?"

Mrs. Hallard nodded.

"They worked a game o' that sort once at some Christmas doin's where I was raised. Did you ever think o' me goin' to Sunday-School?" she asked, with a bitter little laugh.

"Sure I did." Gard went on with his simile. "A man 's got to hold on to his own string," he said. "And follow it up till he gets to the core of the apple. He 'll find his own share there. This Westcott, he 's trying to haul on other folkses' lines, as well 's his own, and that gets things in a mix-up. We 've got to try and make him play the thing right; but it ain't our party, and therefore it ain't our job to throw him out of the game altogether."

Mrs. Hallard's brows were knit in the effort to follow. She had not herself learned, as yet, to lean upon the logic of events, and vengeance was a part of her own theory of life. Then, because she seemed to find no thoroughfare through the subject, she turned abruptly away from it.

"I met up with your Miss Helen Anderson yesterday," she said, suddenly.

The light in Gard's face was revealing, but he merely stood, expectant, until she had told him the whole of the encounter at Old Joe Papago's, even to Helen's proffer of friendship.

"Bless her!" the man murmured, with face illumined. "Ain't she a brick, though?"

"She 's better 'n a brick," said Kate Hallard, promptly. "She 's a real woman, with a lovin' honest heart. Look here, Mr. Gabriel Gard! Be you goin' to stand round with your quirt in your hand, while that there Westcott devil rides off the range with her?"

Gard's face was pale, and the sweat stood upon his forehead.

"Don't!" cried he, sharply. "You don't know what you 're talking about! A man 's got to follow his own line, I tell you, and get it clear before him, before he asks any woman to take hold of it with him!"

He turned abruptly and left her. Yes: that was what he must do. Whatever was to be met, he must meet it, and clear the way, before he took one step nearer Helen.

"But it 's hard to wait," he muttered, pacing the desert with clenched hands; "hard as wickedness!"

The stage that night brought him a letter from San Francisco. Sawyer, it told him, had left the city. The writer believed that he had gone to Arizona for the winter. He was thought to be somewhere on a ranch in the neighborhood of the Navajo reservation. Gard read that with a little feeling of dismay. He did not care to go up there. He had grown confident that he was not likely to be recognized; but still, there was danger, and he

wanted to keep clear of complications until such time as he was ready to act for himself. If anything should happen to him he had no one to take up his work on the outside. He must find someone whom he could trust.

Suddenly he bethought himself of Sandy Larch. They were friends. He could trust Sandy, and he would.

He spent a long time that evening, writing a letter of instructions for Sandy Larch to read, in the event of any failure in his own plans. This he put carefully inside a worn memorandum book, and did the whole up in a neat packet which he meant to leave with the foreman, together with a heavy money-belt which he was then himself wearing. If necessity arose he would have to trust much to the foreman's shrewd judgment in action, but at least he would fix things so that Sandy should not be acting in the dark.

He got an early start in the morning, and rode out to the Palo Verde. Morgan Anderson was away. He had left at daylight, to go down into Mexico, Sandy Larch explained, on some mining business. Incidentally, he was going to see about some choice lemon trees that he had set his heart upon, and before their arrival ground must be broken to receive them.

"So it 's up to us to git them workin' cows gen-

tled an' onto their job," the foreman told Gard; "We 're goin' to bust 'em out right now."

"Say," he added, "That lawyer-sharp 's here. Came down last night, to see the *patron;* he 's goin' on to Sylvania, I guess. He said somethin' about it, awhile ago."

"I came out to see you on a little business matter, Sandy," Gard had begun, when one of the cow-punchers demanded the foreman's attention. Ere he could turn back to Gard, Westcott came down from the casa and mounted his horse which was standing at the rail.

He greeted Gard curtly. "Going to stay and see the fun?" He queried, with a jaunty air of being entirely at home. "I think I will, too. We 'll be glad to have you."

The future working-stock had been removed to an outlying corral, to make room for the horses the men had been working out. The Palo Verde was short of men that season, and Sandy was obliged to plan his work carefully. The punchers who were to break in the cattle were grouped now, and ready for the fray.

"Come on," the foreman called to Gard, who had tossed his saddlebags down in front of Sandy's shack, and the outfit went tearing across the sand to the outer corrals.

A wagon and a plow had been hauled out to the

scene of action the night before. The principles of gentling the steers were brief and fundamental. Two punchers threw their ropes over the horns of one big brute and dragged him out upon the desert, while two others brought up his yoke-fellow. Once yoked and hitched, with a riata from the horns of each to the saddle-horn of a good man on a clever pony, to tow them along, the creatures could move forward, or die in their tracks. When, as was usual, they decided to do the former, they were considered gentled. Their future, thereafter, was in the keeping of the Mexican who might have them in hand to plow with.

"Hullo, you heap heathen!" Sandy Larch called out to the Chinese cook in the big wagon as the outfit came thundering up. "How 'd you git out here?"

Wing Chang grinned, as was his habit whenever the foreman addressed him.

"Heap tallee fun," he explained. "Me come look see."

Sandy Larch and Manuel had already brought out a steer. Broome threw his rope next, cursing roundly at the greenhorn who was helping him, and whose first wild throw covered the horns of the wrong animal. Since it would be quicker work for him to change than for the other, Broome released his "cow," the big steer that had run him

from the corral the week before, and took hold with the greenhorn.

The brutes were yoked and hitched to the wagon, and the fun began with Chang's precipitate and unpremeditated departure from the vehicle. He rolled over and got to his feet as the cowboys started out over the sand, pell mell, "pully haul," in a medley of shrieks and oaths and thunderous bellowings. The spectators of the proceedings kept along upon the flanks of the procession, shouting encouragement or derision to the sweating cowboys as they galloped, and occasionally lending a hand so far as to lean over and apply the spur to one or the other resisting "bos." In two minutes' time the wildly gyrating mass was well out on the plain.

Then from the corral came the sound of a sudden crash. A huge red and white bulk hurled itself over the bars, and the steer that Broome had released came charging out, mad with rage and fear.

For an instant he stood dazed by the success of his own exploit. None of the other cattle had followed. He alone had possessed the wit and prowess to essay the barrier, one bar of which the greenhorn had failed to secure.

The great brute's hesitation was brief. For an instant he pawed the sand, bellowing challenge to the world; then, head down and tail up, he started like a streak of lightning for the only man on foot.

Wing Chang had already realized his danger, and was flying for his life, his pigtail streaming behind him, his yellow face distorted by fright. The outfit wheeled and took notice.

"Wow! Wow! Fli' gun. Allee samee fli' gun!"

The high-pitched shrieks of the terrified Chinamen rose above the noise of hoofs, the shouts of men, the bellowing of cattle. On he sped, the mighty bulk of his pursuer flashing along in what looked like a continuous streak of red, behind him.

"Hell!" One of the punchers ejaculated. "It 's us to be hunting a new cook!"

The next instant his bronco's heels were twinkling as he raced to the rescue.

Gard had already started. He had no rope, but he was nearest the scene, and he saw, as did the others, that no rope could be flung in time. He was sending his pony along at full speed, minded to get in and head "bos" off. It was Wing Chang's only hope.

The great steer was already perilously near, when the Chinaman stumbled, falling his full length on the sand. His yells still pierced the air in high falsetto, and his feet continued the motions of running, flinging up and down with the regularity of pistons as his long yellow fingers clutched the desert.

Down came the foe! An instant, and the thing would be done; but in between him and his yelling victim flashed a man and a horse, and Gard, reaching down, caught the Chinaman by the belt.

A quick, skilful jerk brought him up as the pony dashed on, and in the same instant the cowboy's rope caught the steer by one upflung hind hoof. The great brute turned a clean somersault in the air, and landed with a crash upon his back.

Gard, keeping hold of the Chinaman, brought his horse to a standstill near a great branching suhuaro, and set the still vociferating Wing Chang upon his feet. The cowboys already had two ropes over the recalcitrant steer, and were leading him back to the corral, minus one long, murderous horn, and greatly chastened in spirit.

It was high noon before the three pairs of cattle were gentled sufficiently to permit of their being yoked without absolute danger to life. By that time each "yoke" had pulled the wagon a quarter of a mile, with more or less sobriety, and had plowed a torturous furrow on the desert.

"Which I would rise in my place," Sandy Larch said, seriously, "an' point with pride at them yoke o' cows as a good morning's work."

He and Gard had ridden back together, and were in the foreman's shack. Westcott had gone on his way to Sylvania.

"I want you to do something for me, Sandy," Gard said. "I 've got to go up north, and I want to leave—"

His hand sought an inner pocket as he spoke, and he drew it out with a look of dismay. Then he began searching his other pockets.

"Lost something?" the foreman said, watching him.

"I—should—say—I—had!"

The full significance of his loss was telegraphing itself to the inner strongholds of Gard's consciousness.

"Sandy!" He sprang to his feet. "I 've got to find it—in a hurry, too!"

He was outside, now, looking for his horse, which had been turned in to feed with the others.

"We 'll rustle a couple more," Sandy said.

"Lord!" he thought, "Something 's eatin' him. I never thought I 'd see *him* in a flurry."

They were ready in a moment, and riding back to the ground they had gone over in the forenoon.

"You kin bet your hat you let it go overboard when you reached fer that blasted Chink," Sandy said, and they made for the spot where Gard had rescued Wing Chang.

But no brown packet rewarded their scrutiny of the ground. They paced the desert on to where

Gard had set the Chinaman on his feet, and found nothing but the hole of a Gila monster. Sandy kicked it open with his heel, and the occupant came up, hissing hideously, but that was all.

They circled the whole ground of the morning's operations, but without result, and at last they returned to the shack. Gard's face was drawn in haggard lines, but he had recovered his poise.

"I reckon that thing 's got tromped down into the ground," Sandy said, by way of consolation. "I did n't see none of the boys pick up nothin'. They 'd a' hollered if they had, an' we was all together."

"All except Westcott." Gard spoke very quietly, but Sandy shouted.

"Gosh! That 's so," He cried, "I fergot him fer a minute. I swan! Would it be mighty bad if he was the one to find it?"

"A little worse, in some ways, than anybody else living."

"Lord! Lord! But I don't see how he could, Gard: He rode off to Sylvania. It 's happened the way I said. They was a mighty lot o' hoofs rampaging round there, an' your goods, whatever 't was, got tromped in; but you can bet Sandy Larch 'll keep his peepers open fer 't if it 's on top the 'arth."

"Anyway,"—Gard roused himself—"there 's all

the more reason why I should do what I 've got to do while I can."

He was undressing as he spoke, and presently produced the belt.

"I want you to put this away somewhere, Sandy," he said. "If I send you word to do some things for me it may come in handy. And Sandy, if anything happens to me you go and see Mrs. Hallard, and do what you can to help her. She 'll need help."

Not a flicker moved the serenity of the foreman's steady eyes. His was not the friendship that questions.

"I 'll do anything you send word to do, Gard," said he, "but I don't believe I 'll need all that money. You got plenty to use?"

"Sure—" with a sigh. "Money ain't the thing I need most, Sandy."

"Bless yourself for that," was the quick reply. "When it comes to a pinch the filthy 's one of the things inconvenient to miss."

He put the belt away in his own secret hiding-place and busied himself with getting up his friend's horse. Gard meant to ride to Bonesta, and there board the train. If, as he suspected, Westcott had found that tell-tale packet, he must himself move quickly, and settle Mrs. Hallard's matter before he could be apprehended as a fugitive from

justice. Not that Gard meant to be apprehended. But he did not intend that any thought of risk to his personal safety should interfere with the discharge of his duty as he saw it.

"So long, Sandy," he said, out beyond the corrals.

"Adios!"

Sandy gripped his hand heartily, and the two men parted; but Gard made a wide detour, ere he took the desert road, to glimpse from afar the low-walled casa, white in the glaring December sunlight.

He had left the Palo Verde well behind, and was in a little sandy valley, the dry bed of some ancient lake, when he dismounted to tighten his saddle cincha. Pausing an instant, before remounting, he cast a weary glance skyward and gave a cry of surprise.

High in the ether an enchanted landscape, huge, distorted, hung before his vision. Rocks and trees, vast cacti and shimmering plain were there, and moving among them were a horse and rider, followed by a dog.

There was no mistaking the figures. Helen, upon Dickens, was riding on the plain, Patsy keeping her company. The blessed mirage showed them plainly and Gard gazed, dizzy with emotion.

It was but a fleeting vision. Some movement of

the upper air-currents disturbed it and even as he looked it broke into fragments, dissolved and was gone, ere Gard's swelling heart had ceased its wild pounding.

"She is out there in the desert," he murmured, a sobbing catch in his throat, "Oh, God bless her! I love her! I love her!"

He mounted his horse again and rode on, his heart light as a feather, and on his lips the words of a half-forgotten old song.

CHAPTER VIII

GARD had not been wrong in his reading of the mirage. It *was* Helen whose presentment that marvel of the desert had set like a bow of promise in the sky. A mood of restlessness had sent the girl forth seeking refuge in the sunlit candor of the plain from the fear that was upon her, of hidden chambers in her own soul, which she shrank from entering.

She was very quiet. From time to time Dickens, the pony, turned to nip playfully first one then the other of her hooded stirrups, inviting her to a frolic. Once, when a parcel of gaunt Indian dogs went vociferating along a stretch of mesa, within sight and hearing, he broke into a sympathetic scamper, Patsy joining him ecstatically. The rise from a walk to a run was sudden and unexpected, but the girl adapted herself to it indifferently, with the instinctive adjustment of perfect horsemanship.

The pony ran gallantly for a little distance, wait-

ing all the while, expectantly, for the thrill of answering pleasure in motion that failed to come along the rein. One inquiring eye rolled back at his mistress, one fine, pointed ear slanted to catch her least word of command, but Helen was far away and he watched and listened in vain for some hint that she realized his coaxing. Dickens could not understand it. He stretched his graceful neck as he ran, still seeking that answering touch of the bit. Helen's ready hand gave lightly to his thrust, her muscles responding with trained certainty to his every movement, but Dickens wanted her conscious attention. When that was not forthcoming his pace slackened under the retarding weight of her laden spirit. He drooped his head and went half-heartedly, following Patsy, whose vagabond whim had led him from the road.

A feeling of oppression was on the girl. Not even the cleansing touch of the north-west wind, blowing from the far mountains, seemed potent to ease it. Somehow, the desert solitude had grown all at once more complex than ever the busy, active city life had been. The well-loved plain lay all about her as of old, fraught with all its remembered delight, yet imminent with a new mystery. Some message, luring yet baffling, quivered through it. The far blue hills, the golden-roseate sky, the shimmering, wind-stirred air, breathed of

life; but the grim waste, yellow, seared, ancient, the scant, spectral trees, the uncouth cacti, warned, rather, to thoughts of death; and something deep within her was subtly aware of another summons still, which her soul half shrank from heeding, half yearned to understand.

She drew rein presently, as she realized that they were off the trail. At the base of a mass of rock Patsy was scratching frantically at a hole in the earth where a burrowing owl had just disappeared. A carrion crow, disturbed in its tentative investigation of something that lay on the ground, rose complainingly and flapped itself darkly away.

Looking about her Helen came to slow realization of the spot. There were the rocks round which she had come that marvelous morning. Here Gard had lain, Patsy just where she and Dickens stood. Yonder slender thread of pearly vertebra that the raven had been turning over was all that was left of the menace that had lifted itself just there that day.

Second by second she went over the scene, seeing again the spell-bound dog, the flat-headed, venomous snake, the prostrate man, with his serene gaze, his dark eyes telegraphing reassurance to her from the heart of his own deadly peril.

"Oh," she shuddered, feeling again the sense of horror and faintness that had been hers on that

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morning, "What if no one had come! What if I could not have saved him!"

She buried her face in her hands, shutting out the scene, but she could not shut out the memory of those haunting eyes. She saw them still, but now they were troubled, and eloquent of struggle, as they had seemed while he was saying good-by, that morning at the Palo Verde. The girl had wondered, more than once, over that look, so quickly withdrawn. Now she suddenly understood it through the quick response which, at the memory, leaped from her own heart; and she knew, deep down in those recesses which she had shrunk from looking upon, that she had understood all the time.

The mantling crimson swept her face as she sat there, startled, still keeping her hands up, as though to hide it from her own thoughts. She went over in her mind all those days at the rancho, measuring every look, every gesture, weighing every word of Gard's that seemed to afford comfort to her shamed heart.

"He went away without a word," she finally whispered, raising her head. "But I know I can trust him. There was some good reason why he had to go away; but he will come back! Oh, he will come back to me!"

The glory of the skies became all at once part of

the brightness that filled her spirit. The girl's heart was suddenly lifted on mysterious wings into the wider spaces of womanhood. She had heard the message, and was aware.

Yet there was visible as she turned away, but a slender figure in khaki, browned as to cheek and brow, touched to warmth by the desert wind, guiding a dun pony among the rocks and cacti back to the trail.

The dusty thread of its way picked up once more, Helen suddenly awoke to outward things; to the challenge of the north-west wind, and the eager outstretch of the horse she rode. The least imperceptible lift of her bridle arm conveyed to Dickens the welcome news that his mistress answered him. Something of her soul's exultation thrilled through the pony and set his twinkling feet to dancing, and on the instant they were racing pell-mell across the desert, Patsy, wild with joy, careering beside them.

Helen laughed aloud for sheer delight as they sped forward. She stood in her stirrups and sent Dickens ahead, holding him steady but making no effort to check the wild pace, the wind bearing all care from her brain, all doubt from her heart, as they swept on toward the Palo Verde.

"Well!" Sandy Larch said, coming to take the pony's rein as Helen swung down beside the cor-

rals, "You sure was goin' some. I kind o' thought for a minute Dickens was runnin' with you."

"No," laughed Helen, still breathless and exultant with the excitement of the race, "*I* was running with Dickens."

Sandy loosened the cincha and eased the saddle.

"We 'll leave it that a'way till his back cools out," said he, "You 've sure warmed him up."

He turned an approving glance upon the girl as she stood rubbing Dickens' dun-colored nose.

"You look good Miss Helen," he said. "I 'd begun to be afraid they 'd educated all the life an' brightness out'n you back there to your eastern college. I guess, though, you 'll get over it in time."

"Get over the education, Sandy?" she suggested, mischievously; she and Sandy had been pals since her babyhood.

"I 'd be sorry if I should," she added. "Think what a loss it would be."

"Yes," he assented, gravely, "It sure would. They 's the prices of a right smart o' good polo ponies gone into polishin' you off like you be."

"I was comin' to think," he went on, his face awakening genially, "that you was most likely pinin' for them shiny pursuits more 'n you allowed for when you first come back."

"Not a bit of it, Sandy!" Helen's tone was emphatic, "I enjoyed every moment at college; but I

came back to the desert knowing perfectly well that this is the best place in the world."

Her hearty tone satisfied even his jealous ears. The girl had stooped to caress Patsy, who lay panting on the sand, his tongue fluttering like a little red signal-flag. Her eyes were bright and happy, her cheeks touched to a brilliant glow by her run with Dickens. Sandy nodded again.

"Yes," he said, "I guess it ain't hurt you none."

"What?" Helen had forgotten what they had been talking about. She looked up absently, still rubbing Patsy's sides.

"Education," the foreman said, "I was afraid mebby it had."

"Nonsense, Sandy, Education does n't hurt people."

"N-o-" Sandy's acquiescence was deliberative. "Not people o' intellectooals, that has *savez* naturally," he said, "but the critter that gets it fed to him regular wants to be kind o' wide between the ears allee samee."

"Did n't you enjoy going to school when you were a boy, Sandy?" Helen asked; she loved to draw the cow-puncher out.

"Me?" he questioned, unsuspectingly, "Sure: I 'd a liked it first rate if I 'd ever a' went.

"I never did go none till I was growed," he went

on. "Then we started a night-school, back to Michigan, where I was raised. They was a bunch of us set out to see it through, all young fellers that worked the farms day-times. We was plum in love with the idee o' that night-school."

"It must have been interesting," Helen suggested, "You would all have a strong purpose at that age."

"Sure," Sandy grew reminiscent. "We went the first night," he said, "An' we 'd forgot to bring any candles. We went the next night an' the teacher 'd forgot to come."

He gazed across the plain, lost in memory of those far, fond days. "Then we went the third night," he resumed, dreamily, "an' reviewed what we 'd learned the two previous evenin's, and' I cal-'late that finished my schoolin'."

Helen laughed, tweaking Patsy's ears, but the foreman regarded her with mild inquiry, unheeding her mirth.

"Now with you it 's different Miss Helen," he continued, still considering his views on education. "Gettin' learnin' 's all right for you. First place you 're smart."

"Thank you," Helen bowed over Patsy.

"You 're sure welcome," gravely.

"Furthermore," Sandy proceeded categorically,

"You bein' a girl, you don't have to get your livin'. A man now, a practical man that 's gotter rustle his grub, don't wanter pack no extry outfit."

He turned toward Dickens, who all this time had been standing half asleep, his bridle reins on the ground.

"Dick, he 's gettin' on, ain't he," the foreman said, critically, "but he stands up to it mighty well, yet.

"Now there 's a case where education 's o' value," added Sandy in a tone of pride, "I educated that there horse myself, purpose for you, little gal, an' they ain't no question but Dick 's lived up to his light. I 'll have Manuel give 'im a rub-down."

"Dickens is a treasure," declared Helen, emphatically. "He 's as good as ever; are n't you, Dickens?"

She patted the pony's glossy neck. "Have you found another Manuel already, Sandy," she queried, "I thought Manuel Gordo had been discharged. Father said he would have to be."

"Same old Manuel," was Sandy's reply. "But he 's kind o' got some new notions in his headpiece lately, along of our sin-bustin' friend Mister Gard gettin' after 'im last time he started onto a spree."

"Yes?" His hearer was deeply interested in examining Dickens' sound little knees, and did not look up.

"Why do you call Mr. Gard your sin-busting friend, Sandy?" she asked, still intent upon the pony. Nothing loth, the foreman plunged into an enthusiastic account of his first meeting with Gard. Helen listened, her cheeks still glowing from exercise.

"I never got the rights o' how he took hold o' Manuel," Sandy said, when the story was finished, "Manuel, he ain't talkin' none about it; but he started out on one o' his regular imbibin' bees, which same the *patron* 'd give out was n't to be overlooked again, an' all I know is he comes home all right next mornin' an' gets on his job, just as I 'm supposin' it 's me to be rustlin' another puncher. I 'm mighty glad just then, for Manuel 's sure a first-class man on cows. He allows Gard made him come, an' I know nobody else ever was able to gentle 'im in when he was up against the impulses for a tussle with booze."

"Gard, he 's got me," the foreman went on. "He ain't none o' your hymn-tune kind Miss Helen; but he 's a right kind all right; just plain good man; which the same ain't common now'days."

Helen, with Patsy beside her, was starting for the casa.

"I guess you 're right Sandy," she called back, absently, without turning around, and Sandy looked after her with scant approval.

"There you 've got it," he muttered discontentedly, to the pony, "Old an' young they 're all alike, the women, when it comes to sizin' up a real man. If it ain't the shine an' the pretty manners for them, why it 's the high forehead, an' the big idees. I 'm disappointed she don't see that more clearly, an' she ridin' herd on a college education for four years!"

He led Dickens away toward the sheds and turned him over to one of the men.

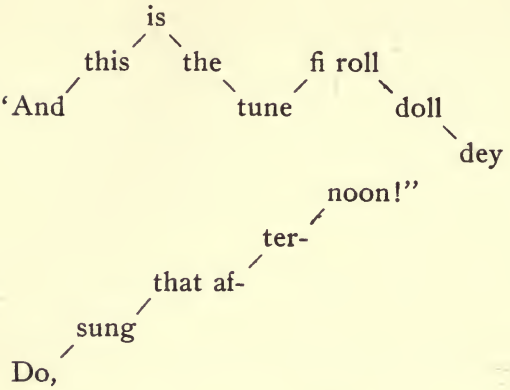
"I suppose now"—he went on with his meditations—"She 's fooled into thinkin' that there sidewinder of an Ash Westcott 's the real thing. Lord! If the right brand was on him I know what it 'd look like!" and the foreman went about his duties with a heavy heart.

CHAPTER IX

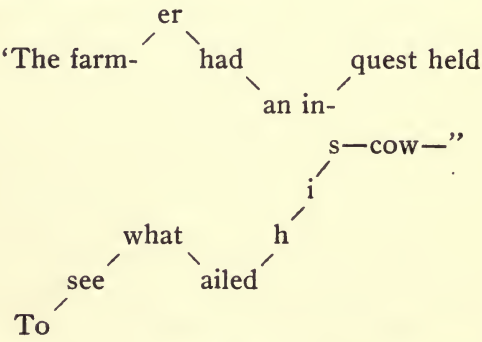
SANDY LARCH was squatted on the sand, against the wall of his shack, lacing a new leather into the cincha-ring of his saddle, and singing The Tune The Old Cow Died On. The ditty was one of his favorites, but his soul was not in it this morning and he sang as mechanically as his fingers moved about their familiar task. It was the morning after Gard's loss of the packet, and he had been out at daybreak, going over every foot of the breaking-ground, but he could find no trace of it.

"Gosh! I 'm sorry," he muttered, testing the new strap. "I hate to see Gard look like he did fer a spell yesterday. If I had any idee Westcott had that thing, whatever it was, I 'd choke it out'n him, fer a punched two-bit-piece."

He turned the saddle over to investigate the other strap, taking up the burden of his song again:



He rolled out the chorus at the top of his lungs, as he cut loose the cincha-thongs, and had carried the next verse to



When a shadow fell upon the sand before him, and he looked up to see Wing Chang.

"Well, my Chinee friend," he said, "Why don't you join in? Can't you sing?"

"No can." The cook shook his head; then the wrinkles about his slant eyes deepened, ran downward, and met, midway of his chops, the upward ones that started around his grinning mouth.

"Allee samee you?" He questioned, slyly.

"Allee samee me what?" demanded Sandy, suspiciously.

"Sing. You catchee him?"

"Do I sing, are you askin'?" roared the foreman. "Why you yaller heathen! Ain't you just bin hearin' me sing?"

Wing Chang's grin intensified, and gradually Sandy's own visage widened genially.

"Take your rise," he said, "you sure got it out'n me then. . . . Look a' here," he added, "What you hangin' round here stealin' music lessons fer? Where you bin, anyway?"

"Bin talkee Bloome," Chang said. "Him wantee coffee."

"Broome! What in hell 's Broome doin' round here this time o' day?"

The sly look deepened in Chang's face. His slant eyes narrowed, and lost their humorous twinkle.

"Say him sick," he explained. "Think mebby Mistlee Westclott come bimeby."

"Not this time, my wise Chink. Westcott 's homeward bound for Tucson just about now."

"Whafor Mistlee Glad go away?" Wing Chang asked, ignoring the other's statement.

"I d' know, Chang." The foreman whistled a few notes, meditatively. The Chinaman drew nearer.

"Whafor Bloome an' Mistlee Westclott hatee him so?"

Sandy regarded him severely.

"See here, now, Chang," he bluffed, "You think I 'm a animated booktionary work, guaranteeded to fit all your 'whatfors' with 'is whats'? Not on your life. Ain't I told you your job 's cookin'? You don't have to break out no question-marks on this here rancho. Sabbee dat?"

Wing Chang returned his intent look without winking.

"Him two allee samee hatee Mistlee Glad," he repeated. "Speakee 'bout him allee timee, behind corral. Allee timee say 'dlamn', an' spit, so." He illustrated on the desert.

"Heap you know," the foreman said, still more severely: "you think you 're a blanked Pinkerton detective, don't you? Well you ain't. Your job 's beans, an' bull meat. You go makee him."

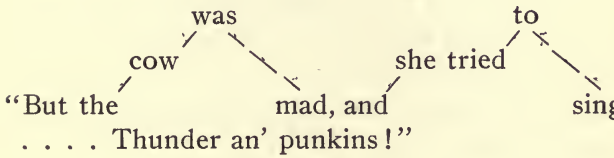
He waved a hand in the direction of Chang's official quarters, and the Chinaman's perennial grin returned.

"Allee lightee," he said, "Then you keep look see out on Mistlee Westclott. Bimeby, he try do Mistlee Glad dirt, I makee my bull meat off him."

He walked off, his hands in his sleeves, and Sandy Larch looked after him thoughtfully.

"Now I wonder what that Chink thinks he knows," he mused. "Chang ain't no fool. He 's *hip* to somethin'. 'T ain't good discipline to ask questions off'n a Chink; but I sure wish I could see into his shiny skull."

He picked up the saddle and took it into the shack, returning, after a moment, to stand in the door, humming—



He did not realize his variation on the ordinary version of his song. He had brought his warbling to a sudden finish, and stood peering out at a horseman who was riding along the edge of the farthest corral.

After a second he stepped back into the shanty, and watched through the crack of the half-open door.

"Sure 's shootin' " he muttered, "The Chink was right. It *is* Westcott."

His ear caught a low whistle that was presently answered from quarters. Sandy remembered that he, himself, was supposed to be at the upper range. He would have been on his way there but for the defect in his cincha-strap. He stopped to consider, wondering whether he had been singing loud enough for Broome to hear him.

"That 's what comes o' tryin' to be a *prima donna,*" he muttered. "But any way I bin still long enough to make him think I 'm gone, if he did hear."

He stepped out upon the sand.

"They 's something sure goin' on out yonder," he said, "Sandy Larch, you 're managing this here shebang while the *patron* 's away; why ain't you eligible to a box-seat?"

A long row of outhouses and ranch buildings stretched out from the foreman's shack to the men's quarters, and still beyond these were two fodder-sheds. The last of these was about half full of hay. It stood at the very edge of the farther corral, and Sandy noted that Westcott had ridden up into its shade.

The foreman slipped off his jangling spurs, and keeping well in the shadow of the buildings, made his way to this shed. He went with wonderful lightness and quickness for so big a man, and was presently creeping among the hay bales.

Outside, Westcott sat his horse, while Broome leaned against the wall. Guided by the sound of their voices, Sandy worked his way along, close to the boards, until he was directly opposite them.

"What makes you think you know where the burro is?" Westcott was saying as Sandy came within hearing.

"That 's *my* think," was the sulky reply. "I ain't no way bound to tell you it, special as you say you don't care about sittin' in the game."

"Oh, I did n't really say that!" There was a curious ring of exultation in Westcott's voice.

"I only said," he resumed, "that I had my own ways of finding out things. I have; and I dare say I could put my hands on your burro, if I needed it in my business."

"A heap you could," Broome sneered. "Mebby you think you kin put your hands on Gard, too, if you need 'im in your bizness. Well, mebby you kin; an' mebby you would n't git smashed if you tried it."

"Put my hands on him—" The lawyer's voice was thick with emotion. "I 've got the blasted fool between my thumb and finger now," he said, "When I get ready, I can smash him like *that!*"

Sandy Larch heard the speaker's two palms come together.

"Not while Sandy Larch is 'round, my fine liar-

at-law," he muttered under his breath. Then he heard Broome's incredulous grunt.

"What 's got you bughouse?" the cowboy asked, and Westcott laughed.

"Do you want to know who this fine Mister Gabriel Gard really is?" He sneered, and the listener in the shed fairly held his breath to hear.

"Do you know? You said you did n't."

"I just happen to," Westcott said, deliberately. "And I know he could no more file on a claim, or on anything else in this land, than that little she-ass you seem so keen to get hold of."

"Why not?"

"Because—" Westcott's voice was vibrant with hate.

"Because," he repeated, "He 's a damned state-prison convict. That 's why not!"

Inside the shed Sandy Larch's face shone white in the gloom. Outside there was a sound of Broome's hard breathing. Westcott's statement seemed to have deprived the cowboy of speech.

"Do you remember Dan Lundy?" the lawyer said, and Sandy started.

"I never knowed 'im," Broome replied. "He was a pal o' Sandy Larch's."

"So? I did n't know that. Then this here Gard won't be so thick here when Sandy knows. But he

won't be very thick anywhere, in the open, for that matter." Westcott laughed.

"This fellow 's the one who did the business for Lundy," he added.

"Killed him?"

"Knifed him in his shack. He did three years for it, and then broke jail."

"How d' you know?"

The foreman strained his ears to listen, a look of wondering comprehension in his face.

"That 's my business," Westcott said. "I 've got it down in black and white. He came up to Blue Gulch when I was there, and Frank Arnold came up to take him again. That was Arnold's last job."

"He was drowned, I remember," Broome spoke in a hoarse whisper.

"Either that, or this fellow that calls himself Gard did for him, as he did for Lundy. Arnold was a good man. Lord! When I think the other fellow 's hanging around here with Larch this minute—"

"He ain't here;" Broome said. "He went off yest'day."

"Fury! Where to?"

"I d' know. He rode off some time in th' afternoon. He 'd lost somethin' when we was workin'

out them blame cows, an' was mighty cut up, I heard. An' when he could n't find it he went off."

"Skipped—blast it!" Westcott seemed to consider.

"I know what he lost, all right," he went on. "Good thing for him Sandy Larch did n't find it. But I 'll land him all right, too . . . But that ain't the point," the lawyer continued. "The point is this: He can't hold that claim. There 's nothing to keep us from walking in and taking possession, if you think you can find it."

"You bet your life I can find it," Broome swore.

"First, though," Westcott spoke again, "I want to go up to Phoenix. I can get the noon train. And I 'm going to fix our Mister Gard—his name was Barker in those days—as he ought to be fixed. He won't be out of reach so that the authorities can't find him, and he won't get away this time. Then I 'll go down to Tucson and file that claim right. Since he 's got no legal status anyone can do that. Then I 'll come back here and we 'll talk about the rest."

"Look a' here," Broome interrupted, "You don't do no filin' till I 'm erlong, or you never gits to where the pay-streak is. You 've gotter do some work on it anyway, before you kin file legal."

"Oh, shut up! Tell *me* what the law is?" Westcott's tone was brutal. "You blamed fool," he

said, "Do you think I can't get along without you?"

"I ain't sech a fool 's some," was Broome's retort, "I know you can't, er you would n't be here. You want me to help find the spot, an' you know it."

"There 's no use fighting over it," said Westcott, more moderately; "I was going to Tucson this afternoon; but I 'll go up to Phoenix first. Mind you, now," he added, "No funny business while I 'm gone, or it 'll be a bad day for you."

Sandy Larch heard Westcott ride away. A moment later Broome's step sounded, returning to quarters.

The foreman waited some time before venturing out. When he did come into the light his face wore a strange, half-dazed expression.

"Well!" he finally ejaculated, "I sure got my money's worth that time."

He walked over to one of the corrals and stood staring with unseeing eyes at a bunch of yearlings huddled together in a corner.

"The dangnation fools!"

His exclamation seemed to afford him no relief; for presently he repeated it.

"The dangnation fools!"

"I should think," he added, "that that there Westcott person 'd wanter kick himself fer a sun-

baked 'dobe ape, when he finds out what he 's bound to find out, when he gets askin' questions along o' Phoenix."

"The plumb fool," he said, again. "To think he don't know Jim Texas confessed to killin' Dan. The pizen-snake always said he would, an' poor old Dan was mighty foolhardy about it.

"But, God!"—his tone was full of pity—"To think that 'Gard' was that poor devil of a Barker! How in tunk did he ever git where he is now?"

He picked up a bit of stone and flung it at the yearlings; not because he bore them a grudge, but through sheer vexation of spirit.

"If he 'd only a' told me," his thoughts went back to Gard. "If he 'd only a' trusted me, 'stid o' writin' it out fer that hell-dog to find." He leaned upon the top-rail of the corral and sighed.

"Lord," he said, "I 'm pretty near all in. It 's too much fer Sandy!"

He could not understand Gard's agitation over the loss of his packet, if, as he now surmised, it merely contained the papers by which Westcott had identified him. He pondered the matter for some time, and then light dawned.

"Look a' here!" he cried. "He 's in the same boat 's Westcott! He 's bin up in the mountains ever since he made his getaway; that 's what! Fer some reason or other he 's just come down, I

wondered where in tunk he 'd drifted in from. An' he ain't found out yet about Jim Texas."

Silence again, while Sandy meditated upon the situation. Then another phase of it struck him.

"What 's he doin' round here, anyway? Why ain't he showin' some enterprise? What 's he hangin' round Kate Hallard for?"

He could not tell. It was the one thing about Gard that to him seemed to need explanation, and he would trust his friend without that. He was dismissing the matter when a fresh thought came.

"If he *don't* know," he muttered. "If he ain't fixed his matters up, then that sneakin' law-buzzard 's right. He can't file any claim. They can *do* him, there; even if they can't jail 'im. By the powers! That 's what they can do; an' here I am, can't leave the rancho!"

He groaned as this thought came home to him. He realized that he must stay at the Palo Verde: Morgan Anderson had left him in charge.

"If 't want fer leavin' the little gal all alone—" He stood distractedly considering.

"I don't know enough about it anyway," he at last exclaimed in despair. "Ah! That 's where Kate Hallard comes in."

The words were scarcely off his lips when looking up, he gave a low whistle of surprise.

"Sure 's beeswax," he said, softly, unconsciously

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straightening up. "Here 's exactly where Kate Hallard comes in."

It was in fact Mrs. Hallard, riding in from the desert, her handsome face more troubled in expression than Sandy had ever imagined it could be.

"Hello, Kate," he called, going to meet her. "What 's up? You don't look like you was out fer your health so to speak."

"I ain't." Mrs. Hallard drew rein and looked down at the foreman.

"I ain't out fer my health an' I ain't sure what I be out after," she said, without further preamble.

"Ash. Westcott was in t' the grille this morning tryin' to make a deal with me in a matter Mr. Gard 's been tendin' to fer me. I would n't swap no lies with him and bimeby he gets mad an' runs off a lot o' talk I don't seem to get straight, but it sounded like he had Gard nailed, an' was goin' to do 'im dirt. Sure 's you live, Sandy, he 's meanin' mischief. I 'm worried."

She turned her horse toward the shade, Sandy walking beside her.

"I d' know what to do," she continued. "Mr. Gard, he 's gone off on business o' mine an' I d' know what Westcott *is* cookin' up against him. I know he 's got a good will to do him all the harm he can, though, an' I come over to talk to you about it."

The cow-puncher stood regarding her, intently.

"Kate," he said, "do you know who this Gabriel Gard really is?"

She looked at him blankly, her hard face set.

"You don't need stand me off," he cried. "If you 're his friend you know I am, too. An' he 's sure needin' us both."

He told her, with picturesque brevity, of Gard's loss and Westcott's find, and of the talk which he had overheard between Westcott and Broome.

"Them blamed sneakin' coyotes is puttin' up a cinch game on our man," he said, when he had finished, "an' something 's gotter be done about it. Where 's Gard gone? Is that his real name? Why ain't he lookin' after his matters?"

Mrs. Hallard was thinking fast. Sandy's story had been illuminating in many ways.

"You 're dead right about one thing, Sandy," she said. "He don't know about Jim Texas. That 's what 's bin eatin' 'im."

She suddenly realized the significance of Gard's answer to her question about Helen Anderson. He did not know that his innocence was practically established.

"Well," Sandy demanded, "what in thunder 's he doin' round here then? Why ain't he tryin' to fix things up fer himself? He 's got a' plenty cash. He ought to be gittin' a good lawyer an'

seein' if he can't prove his innercence. As 't is now, he must think he 's likely to be jugged any minit."

Kate Hallard's eyes flashed.

"He *does* think so," she cried. "He 's afraid of it, too. That I know. An' bein' afraid, here 's what the man does:"

She leaned from the saddle and looked Sandy in the eyes.

"He somehow gits hold of a deed o' Sam Hallard's, to that Modesta range Sam bought just 'fore he was killed. I give that deed to Arnold to record, an' Mr. Gard ain't said nothin' to me, but I figure he an' Arnold was together when the cloudburst come that gits Arnold. He got Frank's coat, someway, an' that deed was in the pocket. I d' know where he 's bin all this time, but I know one thing. He ain't bin in no wickedness."

"Bet your life not," Sandy assented. "Drive erlong, Kate."

"Well: the deed 's bin lost these two years, an' that devil, Westcott, he found it out, an' he done me out'n the prop'ty. Oh! He 's a side-winder, fer sure!"

"That 's no lie," was Sandy's comment.

"It 's plain 's day," Mrs. Hallard went on. "You say he 's got a' plenty cash. *I* know he could light out from here an' go where he could

live like a lord. He 's got that much a' plenty. But 'stid o' that he comes back here to this God-forsaken place; an' what for? Why to help me. He must a' tracked over half the territory to find me an' gimme back that deed; an' when he finds how things stands he settles down here to see I git my rights. With this thing a' hangin' over him, so far 's he knows, he 's gone back where he was known, to try 'n' find a feller that witnessed the transfer . . ."

Kate Hallard was all but sobbing with excitement and fear.

"Lord above us,—if they is any!" she gasped. "They ain't never a man like that. He 's pure angel!"

"Naw; he ain't that, quite," Sandy said, swallowing hard. "He 's man enough to need that gold-mine in his business, one o' these days, an' he stands to git robbed o' that, I 'm afraid."

"How can they touch it? He 's an innercent man."

"Yes; but he 's a criminal yet, in the eyes o' the law, if he ain't bin pardoned an' cleared. So his notice an' filin' ain't legal."

"Hell!" he exclaimed, and begged pardon next instant. "I wish I was in Prescott," he added.

"What would you do in Prescott?" Mrs. Hallard asked, eagerly.

"Do? I 'd see the Gov'nor; git them papers made out, an' scoot fer Tucson an' bring that there filin' up to date."

"Heavens an' earth! Kin anybody do that fer 'im?"

"Sure."

"Then look here, Sandy Larch: *I 'm* goin' to Prescott."

"You?"

"Yes, me; why not? You say anybody kin see the Gov'nor fer 'im. Well: they ain't many people knows Dave Marden much better 'n I did once. I rather reckon he 'd do 's much fer me 's fer you."

There was a deeper hue in the speaker's cheek than even excitement had touched it to: but the foreman did not notice it.

"Bully fer you Kate!" he cried. "I 'm inclined to think well o' that scheme o' your'n."

"I 'll have to hustle if I 'm goin' to git away to-day." Mrs. Hallard was practical and alert at once. "I guess I can skip back an' git ready to catch the night train. That 'll get me to Prescott in the morning."

"Westcott, he 's just gone up on the noon run," Sandy explained. "He 'll be goin' on to Phoenix I reckon."

"Lord! I don't wanter see him. I 'm glad I

could n't get that train if I tried." Mrs. Hallard was already riding away.

"So long, Sandy!" she cried, over her shoulder. "I 'll do my best."

"Good luck to you!" Sandy waved his big cowboy hat.

"Kate 'll fetch it I reckon," he muttered, turning toward the sheds. "But now who 'd a' thunk we 'd a' fixed it up that a'way? Gosh-hemlock! What funny things you see when you ain't got a gun!"

Kate Hallard, meantime, was thinking of many things as she rode back to Sylvania. The tide of old memories was at flood as she thought of the man whom she was going to see in Gard's behalf. She had spoken truly when she told Sandy Larch she had once known the Governor well. How well, was a matter that lay deep in her heart, a part of her hard, sordid, unprotected girlhood, dead and buried now these thousand years, it seemed to her. Something within her that she had thought was dead with it shrank from the encounter of the morrow, but cowardice was not one of the woman's weaknesses. She set her shoulders squarely at the memory of what Gard was braving for her.

"They 's one thing sure," she said, half-aloud. "Dave 'll do anything *can* be done. I reckon I

can bank on that. He wa' n't a bad sort in the old days."

The road ran along the edge of an ancient lake, now a sea of sand, and for many years, in the new order, the great rodeo ground of the region. The entrance was yet marked by two big posts, one of which bore a great yellow-and-black poster, such as the Salvation Army puts up through the desert wastes, seeking to turn the plainsman's thoughts to higher things.

Beneath the poster, on the sand, a bull-snake and a burrowing owl fraternized comfortably at the mouth of the hole that was their common dwelling. Above it a carrion crow perched, cawing dismally at the scene. The poster itself was sun-bleached and weather-worn, peppered with the bullets of passing cowboys who had taken jocular shots at it, and beaten by the blown desert-sand, but still legible. Kate Hallard had seen many of its kind; had passed this very one on her way out that morning. She glanced at it now.

"FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY-BEGOTTEN SON, THAT WHOSOEVER BELIEVETH ON HIM SHOULD NOT PERISH—" The rest was obliterated.

In her softened mood the words held her atten-

tion as they had never before done. She checked her horse to read them again.

"I d' know much about it," she murmured. "The desert 's always been a mighty handy place fer perishin'; if they *was* a God, now, an' He was int'rested enough to give us a few more folks like this here Gabriel Gard, I guess mebby believin' 'd come handier, too."

She rode on again, still thinking of Gard.

"We 've got to help him out o' this." A dull flush crept up to her hair and her black eyes suddenly filled with unfamiliar tears.

"Go to Dave Marden fer him—" she cried, "Lord! I 'd go to the Old Nick himself to help him, an' that 's the truth!"

CHAPTER X

"UPON my word, Kate! Upon my word: this is the biggest surprise I 've had since I came down with the mumps last New Year's!"

The Governor of Arizona sprang up from his big desk chair and crossed the room as Mrs. Hallard came into his private office. His manner was cordial, the more so, perhaps, that it was tinged with a nervousness of which he was uneasily aware. If Mrs. Hallard was aware of this nervousness, she made no sign. Her own manner was strangely quiet.

"It 's the biggest kind of a surprise," the Governor said, again. "I could hardly believe it when they brought in your name."

He established his visitor in a big arm-chair, and seated himself opposite her, his face a little in the shadow.

"Why," said he, "I have n't seen you, Kate, since—" He paused, abruptly.

"It 's a long time since you seen me, Dave; that

's straight," Mrs. Hallard said, "But I 'm mighty glad you ain't fergot me."

"Forgotten you!" Governor Marden's tone was reproachful.

"Do you think ten years is enough to forget friends in?" he demanded. "Why—" with a laugh,—"even a political memory 's longer than that, Kate."

There was silence for a moment, and silence was the last thing the Governor desired at that time.

"I never heard where you went after Ed's death," he said, tentatively.

"You would n't a' bin likely to," was the reply. "I moved round considerable after that."

"So? How 's the world used you, on the whole? Pretty prosperous?"

"Up an' down. I ain't so awful prosperous; but I ain't complainin' neither. I 'm alive, an' what I am, workin' fer my livin' an' neither better nor worse 'n some other folks." Mrs. Hallard spoke lightly, and her tone was non-committal.

"I 'll bet you are n't any worse than other folks," the Governor said, with bluff good-will. "You were always better than ninety-nine hundredths of the men, Kate," he added, "while as for the women—"

Kate Hallard interrupted him.

"Don't you bother about them, Dave," said she,

"I ain't matchin' myself up with no women. It don't pay."

She laughed, a hard little sound, and a dull flush went up to the Governor's hair.

"You might, for a fact, though, my girl," he persisted, half sullenly. "There 's lots of women with straight-laced ideas that I would n't trust half so quick. Unlace their ideas a little and they 'd go to the devil so quick you 'd never catch 'em. The lacing 's all that holds them."

Mrs. Hallard made no reply; her companion sat regarding her, but seeing, instead of the woman before him, the quick, handsome girl of a dozen years earlier. Old "Soaker" Lally's daughter had been in her teens when first he knew her, handsome as they made 'em, he thought, now, remembering. And he had been a young fool—and worse—but not wholly a villain; not that.

"I—I 'd have made things right, Kate, if you had n't sent me off," he said, lamely, speaking out of old memories.

"Yes," the woman flashed, "an' we 'd a' had a nice little hell all to ourselves, after."

The man demurred.

"Yes we would!" she went on, "*I* know. First place, Dave—I did n't sense it then, but I have since—we did n't neither of us really care. We was only hot-blooded young fools that thought

we did. . . . Anyhow: it 's sleepin' dogs now," she added, conclusively. "Best let 'em lie. You done more 'n most men would, I 'll say that much, when you wanted to marry me—but I saved you that, anyhow," with another laugh; "I 'd a' looked sweet, would n't I? tryin' to make good as Governor's lady?"

"You 'd make good at anything you undertook, Kate," Marden insisted, sturdily.

"Maybe so: but thank my stars I know, yet, when I ain't got the hand to stack up on. What a man wants in a wife, Dave, is a woman 't can chaperon his daughter when he gits one."

Mrs. Hallard hesitated a moment, her voice softening. "I never had no watchin' over, myself," she said, "I would n't a' stood fer 't from the old man, an' my mother died when I was a kid; but a girl needs it: an' it takes the right sort o' woman to give it."

"That 's nothing here nor there, though," she went on, in her wonted tone; "Ed Hallard married me with his eyes open, an' I was a good straight wife to 'im."

"That 's just what I say," Marden repeated. "I 'd back you to be a good straight anything you undertook. That 's your nature. I 'm not passing you any bouquets, my girl. You were always as straight as a man."

Mrs. Hallard laughed, with cynical good humor.

"Lord, sonny!" she cried. "If them ain't bouquets, be a little easy with whatever 't is you do call 'em. Admirin' the men as I do, such is some overpowerin'."

Governor Marden flushed again, and edged away from ground that he felt to be precarious.

"Look here," he said, "What do you mean by saying you 're working for your living? Is that a figure of speech? Ed Hallard ought to have left you well fixed. I heard he sold that claim of his for a good round sum. Did n't he do right by you, Kate?"

"He meant to. He thought he did. I 'll tell you about that later." Mrs. Hallard waved a hand in careless dismissal of her own matters.

"Dave," she began, earnestly, "I want a favor off you."

Governor Marden was alert in an instant.

"Anything I can do for you, 'for old sake's sake,' " he answered.

"This ain't any old sake's sake," was her answer. "It 's just fair play an' justice."

"Ah! That 's different. Fair play and justice are complicated things to meddle with." The governor shook his head.

"You bet I 'm learnin' that," was Mrs. Hallard's reply. "But they ain't nothin' much complicated

about this business. It oughter be plain cuttin' out an' ridin' off."

"Were n't you District Attorney when Dan Lundy was killed, Dave?" she asked, suddenly.

The governor started, glancing quickly at his interrogator. Then he was silent for a moment, staring thoughtfully at a map of Arizona on the wall back of Mrs. Hallard's chair.

"Lord; that 's what I was!" he finally said with a sigh. "I don't like to talk about it," he added.

"Why not?"

"From your bringing the matter up I guess you know why not," Marden frowned, as over some painful memory. "I reckon you 've got some idea how it was," he continued. "I did my duty as I saw it; but we bagged the wrong man, and I 've never been able to feel happy about it."

"Then it was true about Jim Texas confessin'?"

"Yes. He confessed when he was dying, but it did n't do the other poor fellow any good. He was dead already." The governor sighed again. . . . "I told you justice and fair play were ticklish things to handle," he said.

"But he ain't dead."

"Who ain't?"

"The other fellow. He was n't killed when Frank Arnold was."

Governor Marden sat silent, his eyes questioning

his visitor. Kate Hallard explained, briefly. The governor touched a bell, and his secretary appeared. The latter had been Marden's clerk in his district attorney days.

"Seth," the official said, in a voice that rang with suppressed excitement. "You remember the Lundy case, don't you? Whatever became of Barker, who went up for it?"

The secretary considered.

"Why, yes," he began, "he broke jail." His auditors nodded.

"I remember about it," he went on, "because of Jim Texas, and what came after. He got away to some place in the mountains, and then he was re-arrested. A deputy-sheriff went down on information from Ash. Westcott—"

"What 's that?" Mrs. Hallard's tone was explosive.

"Who d' you say?" she demanded.

"Ashley Westcott," the secretary repeated. "He 's—"

Kate Hallard interrupted again, her eyes blazing.

"I know who he is," she flashed. "He 's the same cur-dog that 's tryin' to down 'im again. He 's the same—oh, D—Governor Marden, you was askin' why Ed Hallard did n't leave me better fixed. Well: here 's why:—"

The story came pouring out at white heat, while the two men listened, now and then exchanging significant glances.

"In the name of heaven, Kate," the governor said, when Mrs. Hallard paused for breath, "why did n't you come and tell me of this deviltry? We 'd have stopped Westcott's game so quick he 'd never have known he chipped into it."

"I did n't know any better," the woman said, bitterly. "I don't know as I 'd a' come here with it; but if I had n't bin an ignorant fool I 'd a' knowed I could do something; but I never did till Mr. Gard told me."

"You say this chap calls himself Gard? Is that his real name, or Barker? What makes you think he 's the same man?"

"Only what Westcott said—that Sandy Larch heard. He must a' found something that put 'im wise."

"It looks that way," the governor said. "Westcott 's no fool, knave though he is. And do you know, Kate—he 's laying his lines to be the next District Attorney! It looked, till you came in and told us this, as if he 'd led his line clean to Washington. Did n't it, Seth?"

The secretary gave a grunt. Governor Marden turned again to Mrs. Hallard. "We 'll meet his game this time," he said. "See him and go him

about a thousand better. You 've done me a big favor, Kate. What 's the one you want done?"

"I want Mr. Gard's pardon fixed up," his visitor said, promptly. "That 's what I come for. I want the papers fixed up right, an' then I wanter know if they ain't some way to put a cinch on that there claim."

"Sure there is," was the reply. "The pardon 's dead easy; only it 'll have to be Barker's pardon. Seth, you fix up the papers will you, and I 'll sign right off.

"Glory be!" The governor heaved a mighty sigh as the secretary went back to his own room. He got up and took a turn about the office, throwing back his shoulders with an air of relief.

"That thing 's weighed on me," he exclaimed. "You don't know what mistakes like that mean to a man. It 's been a dead weight, sometimes."

He turned, quickly, and took down a volume of mining-law.

"I suppose," he said, after pouring over its pages for some moments, "yes, I guess Westcott *could* do something about that. I don't know as he 'd dare try, when he finds out the truth, but it 's best not to take any risks with a 'sarpint' like that, and I 'm going to have Unricht go down to Tucson with you, Kate, and fix the whole matter right. There 's

time enough to get a night train if you want to—" He looked at his watch.

"That 's just what I do," she replied, promptly.

"All right, then." The governor turned. Unricht had come in with a document ready for the official signature.

"I was n't sure," the secretary said, "so I stopped to look it up in the testimony. Maybe you remember, Governor," he went on, "that Barker claimed at the trial that he had retained Westcott and paid him a big fee. He had n't any more money to pay a lawyer; so the court appointed him one."

The governor was signing the paper.

"By gum!" he exclaimed, looking up, "I do seem to remember. Sounded like a cock-and-bull story then. Westcott had left town, you know.

"But say, friends:" he straightened up and looked from one to the other of his auditors,— "the desert 's got a beauteous lot of poison citizens," he said, "what with tarantulas, and sidewinders, and ground-rattlers, and Gila monsters, and hydrophobia skunks; but it don't breed anything more poisonous than a man, when he *is* poison."

He threw down his pen and handed the paper he had signed to Mrs. Hallard.

"That 's done," he said, gleefully. "Unricht,

can you fix it to go down to Tucson to-night, and do a little business for me to-morrow?"

The secretary consulted his calendar and decided that he could arrange for the expedition. It was agreed that Mrs. Hallard and he should meet at the station in time for the evening train. "About that matter of your own, Kate," the governor said, as Mrs. Hallard was leaving, "I should n't wonder if your Mr. Barker-Gard was equal to fixing Westcott; but if either of you need any help you call on David Marden. Now don't you forget!"

Unricht and Mrs. Hallard went straight to the proper office, on their arrival in Tucson next morning, and the secretary saw to it that Gard's claim was correctly refiled, and the matter put in unassailable shape. This done, they sought the St. Augustine, where Kate was to wait for the forenoon train to Bonesta.

"I 'll have to leave you a little while before it goes," Unricht was saying, as they stood in what had been the vestibule of the old church. "My own train is earlier—"

"Sh—hush—"

Mrs. Hallard drew her companion back into the slender shelter of a great pillar. "Look over there," she whispered, and Unricht glanced in the direction indicated.

Westcott had just come into the building and

stepped up to the desk. He was making some inquiry about the next train south, and the watchers had a good look at him.

His face was livid, and drawn into an expression of concentrated rage. He looked like a venomous creature of the desert, and as he crossed the office and ascended the two or three steps to the great dining-room, has step was wavering and uncertain.

"And he don't drink," Unricht whispered to Mrs. Hallard. "I know that. He 's just drunk with rage."

"But I don't wanter go down on the same train with him," Mrs. Hallard whispered back. "I should be scared o' my life."

Unricht reassured her. "He would n't really hurt you," he said, "but I don't blame you for wanting to dodge him. I should n't wonder if he was going down to see you, though. He must know he 's in a pretty pickle if he can't make terms with you. Maybe you 'd better see him now, while I 'm along," he suggested.

Mrs. Hallard demurred. "I 'd rather get home," she said. "Mr. Gard may be there."

"All right," was the reply. "I 'll telephone Larch you 're getting the afternoon train."

They slipped out and went to another hotel, thereby missing Gard, who presently came in from up the territory, eager to get back to Sylvania, and report to Mrs. Hallard.

CHAPTER XI

WESTCOTT'S state of mind, miserable as it was, would have been more unenviable still had he known that Gard was on the train with him during the journey to Bonesta. The lawyer was hurrying to Sylvania to secure another interview with Kate Hallard in the absence of her champion. He reasoned that she could not yet have heard from Gard, whose quest in the north, he surmised, had something to do with her business.

He was still puzzled to understand why a man like Gard should have prepared such a statement as was contained in the packet which he had found on the desert. In the light of what he himself had just learned, it seemed as if he must have known that it was unnecessary. The paper bore no date, and he finally concluded that it must have been written at some time before Gard had learned of Jim Texas' confession. Westcott himself had not known of this before going north on this trip. He had been willing to forget the whole business once

he was sure that Barker had disappeared forever. Now he was in a white rage at the position in which he found himself.

He had been in too great haste, after learning the facts of Gard's innocence, to think further of the mining claim. When Mrs. Hallard and Unricht saw him in the St. Augustine he had just come in from the north. He spent no time in Tucson, looking up records which he took for granted Gard had already made right. He was sure that the latter's first act upon returning to civilization would be to put his own affairs into secure shape. Only in some such way was it possible for a mind like Westcott's to understand a man's willingly remaining in a position which must otherwise seem to him perilous, for the sake of seeing right done to a woman like Mrs. Hallard. He realized, too, with a horrible sense of being trapped, that he himself was in Gard's power.

How that power would be used he felt no doubt. The man was probably only making sure of his ground. He would have his case clear before he struck, and no one knew, better than Ashley Westcott, how clear that case could be made. He had reckoned absolutely upon the loss of that deed, and upon Kate Hallard's helplessness and ignorance; and the stolen property now stood on record in his own name.

The sweat started upon his forehead as he told over in his mind the motives that would inevitably impel a man in Gard's position to seek revenge upon him. No wonder the fellow had taken this business up. No wonder he had not been tempted to make a deal with him. Westcott flinched inwardly, as he remembered his own fatuous proposition that morning at the Palo Verde. How Gard must have been laughing at him, behind that grave face. The matter stood out before him in the fierce light of his own hatred; he could conceive of no other feeling actuating his enemy.

Any way he looked at it, the man was bound to be meditating his ruin. Through the whirl of Westcott's thoughts ran but one slender thread of hope. If he could see Kate Hallard he might effect a compromise with her. When last he saw her he had been sure that he had Gard in his power. He had boasted to her that he meant to crush the fellow; to show her what a helpless creature she had trusted. She had laughed at his threats, but there had been anxiety under her laughter. He had seen that as he departed, exulting. Perhaps he could work that line with her again. He would see; he *must* see!

If he could not arrange with her there was nothing for him to do but to run for it. He might be able to realize on the property before getting

away; a cattleman up north was even then considering its purchase. In any case, Kate Hallard failing him, he must get out of Arizona; get out of the country, even, if Gard's hatred still pursued him. To stay, after this, spelled jail.

At the word Gard's face came up before him as it had looked that night in Blue Gulch, and the horror of it set him shivering. Remorse was no part of his emotion; he felt only a sense of impotent regret at the shattering of his plans, and a blind hatred of Gard as the cause of his undoing. He cursed him in his heart as he sat staring out upon the desert landscape slipping past the car window.

Its desolation added to his horror, and his fury. It was a hellish place, working its own infernal way with men whom fate forced to dwell in it; but he had worked, and planned, and striven there; he had seen his dear ambition coming within reach of his hand. Now he saw himself hunted like a jack-rabbit from the scene of all his hopes and desires.

And there was Helen. He believed that he had stood a chance there. And he had meant, once he was out of this snarl, to live straight. With her to help him he could go far. Arizona would be a state some day. There were big possibilities ahead. He writhed in his seat at the thought, and cursed Gabriel Gard anew for plotting his downfall.

The horse that he had ridden to Bonesta several days before had been sent back to Sylvania; so Westcott went up to the outfitting town in the tri-weekly stage which was waiting at the train. This fact enabled Gard the better to keep out of the lawyer's sight. His own horse was in the Bonesta stable.

He was no more anxious to encounter Westcott than the latter was to meet him. He had seen him at the Tucson station in time to seek another car from the one in which the attorney seated himself, and now he had but to keep out of view until the lumbering stage swung up the road with his foe on board.

Gard had found his man, and had in his pocket Sawyer's affidavit to having taken the acknowledgment of the Hallard deed. He had learned, too, that this deed ante-dated the one of record to Westcott's client. This personage, he had ascertained, was a mere tool of the attorney's. The actual holder of the property was Westcott himself.

He was greatly troubled, on arriving at Sylvania, to find that Mrs. Hallard had gone away. He tortured his mind for an explanation of her sudden journey. He was afraid that she had been again misled by Westcott. If the lawyer really *had* found that lost packet there was no predicting

the uses to which he might put it in making representations to Mrs. Hallard.

Sing Fat could give him no information beyond the fact that Mrs. Hallard had ridden out to the Palo Verde, returning in "one velly big hully-up," to prepare for a journey to Prescott. He could not tell when she would return.

Gard pondered the matter in sorry perplexity. He could not fathom the mystery, but he feared—everything. He dreaded what might have taken place at the Palo Verde. What had taken Mrs. Hallard there? What had Sandy Larch been told? What did Miss Anderson believe?

The last was the question of his deepest thought. He was not fearful for himself, of anything that might come. The doubts and the temptations of the situation had all been settled in his mind. He had learned stern lessons in solitude, and he brought them sternly to bear in this exigency. This thing had been given to him, Gabriel Gard, to carry through. Whatever might come to him as one human being did not count. It was the life of the world that counted, and to see justice done was just now, for him, a part of that life. If payment seemed to fall upon him, who was he, that he could not bear his burden? Neither his courage nor his purpose faltered before the outlook.

But that Helen Anderson should believe of him

the things he was sure that Westcott would try to make her believe, was more than his reason told him need be borne. The mastering desire of his soul at this moment was that she should believe in him; that she should know the truth from his own lips before she judged him. The vague plan that had suggested itself to him on the way up now took definite shape. He resolved to ride out to the Palo Verde; to see Helen if possible, and get her to listen to the whole story. She should believe him, if there was any power in truth to make its impress upon a true nature.

"She *is* true," he told himself, recalling her clear, candid eyes, her fine, fearless spirit. "She will believe me. She must believe me. Oh, God, help me *make* her believe me! It 's all I ask!"

He had no intention of putting his fate to further test. When he should be free; able to hold up his head without shame among men; then the right to speak would be his. Then he would lay his life at her feet. It was hers. But now, he would have given his last drop of blood just to know that she knew, and that she believed him.

He left Mrs. Hallard's papers, securely sealed, in Sing Fat's care, seeing them put in a place of safety before he turned away to where he had put up his horse.

The animal was still feeding; for himself Gard

had forgotten the need of food. He hesitated, loth to take the creature out.

"Goin' far?" the stable man asked.

"Out to the Palo Verde," was the reply.

"Better take one o' our broncs, then," the man jerked a thumb in the direction of a flea-bitten roan standing in its stall.

"That un 'll take you out there all right," he said, "tho' he ain't no shucks of a goer."

"He 'll do," and the roan was brought out and saddled. A man who had slunk from the stable when Gard came in lingered unseen at the head of the alley to see him ride away.

"Gwan," he jeered in drunken exultation as horse and rider passed up the street; "go it while ye can; yer time 's a comin' my fine, pious jail-bird. Here 's where yer wings is goin' to be clipped sure 's my name 's Thad. Broome!"

The cow-puncher had come into town breathing out wrath against Sandy Larch, with whom he had had words. He was foregathering with certain chosen companions, and had already succeeded in getting well on the road to drunkenness. He was headed for Jim Bracton's with his friends when the quartette met Westcott, fresh from an effort to pump Sing Fat regarding Mrs. Hallard's whereabouts.

Sing Fat had been non-committal. He knew

that the lawyer was not in the good graces of his mistress, and so, being a Chinaman, he had little that was definite to tell him. Westcott was in a white rage when he was hailed by Broome, too drunk now to be discreet.

He answered the cow-puncher's surprised greeting shortly, but Broome was not to be put off. He was in a condition to attach importance to his own personality, and he followed Westcott, who was walking away from the town, too furious to endure contact with humanity. The puncher's companions trailed after.

Out beyond the edge of the settlement the lawyer turned, enraged.

"What in hell are you following me for, Broome?" he snapped, savagely.

"Wanter word wi' you, Misher Weshcott," the fellow said, thickly.

"What about? Why are n't you on the range? What are you hanging around here for?" The questions followed one another with a jerk.

Broome burst into a tirade of profanity, the burden of which was that he would take no bossing from Sandy Larch. He had defied the latter and had been given his time.

"So you got yourself fired," Westcott commented in a slow rage. "You 're an even bigger blasted fool than I thought you could be."

Broome blustered, drunkenly. Did Westcott think he was going to stand any lip from Sandy Larch when he had a fortune in sight?

"Fortune—hell!" Westcott's fury broke bounds.

"What you 've got in sight," he said, hoarsely, "is an asylum for damned fools; or else a hemp necktie and a short drop. One or the other 's yours all right."

The cow-puncher stared, stupidly.

"Gwan," he said, "Whatcher givin' us? Gard ain't made no drift; he 's just now gone out to the Palo Verde; I seen 'im."

Westcott was startled.

"What has he gone out there for?" he demanded.

"How 'n hell do I know," was the reply. "When we goin' t' land 'im?"

"Shut up!" Westcott almost screamed the words in the intensity of his nervous pain. "You can't touch Gard, you blasted donkey," he added; "he 's made himself solid with the law. He 's pardoned all right."

"Pardoned!" Broome's jaw dropped. "Did he bring away enough fer that in them two bags?" he gasped.

Westcott made no reply and the cow-puncher turned to his fellows.

"Now wha' d' ye think o' that?" he roared, "You know this here Gard, Jim. He 's that dod-gasted sawney that butted in when you was teachin' old Joe Papago the things he most needed to know that night up to the 'Happy Family.' "

"I guess I know 'im all right, damn 'im," snarled the one addressed. "He done me out 'n a good thing that time. I stood to win—"

"Done ye! Call that doin' ye?" Broome snarled. "He done me out 'n more 'n he did you. Thousands o' dollars he 's robbed me of."

"Aw, pull 'er in easy Broome," interrupted one of the others, coming close. "You never had a thousand in yer life."

"Ye lie! I had my eyes on the richest vein in Arizona, an' this feller lit on me an' nearly killed me when he found I 'd seen it. He chased me out 'n it!"

"I 'd pot any man tried that on me," the other said. "Where in tunk was yer gun?"

"Where 't is now," Broome growled, "an' that 's none o' your business. I 'll git 'im yet. He 's a murderer an' a thief, an' I 'll git 'im yet."

"An' hang for it." This man spoke for the first time. "He ain't worth it."

"Not on your life would I hang fer 't," was Broome's reply. "I tell ye the man 's a murderer an' a thief anyhow; an' as fer his bein' worth it, I

tell ye that claim he 's hanging onto 's got a million in plain sight."

"An' to think of it," he went on, dolorously, "that I had my two hands on them bags, an' hefted 'em, an' saw their color."

"Pity you did n't smell of them while you were about it," sneered Westcott. "It 's about all the good you 'll ever get of the stuff."

"Is it, eh" Broome turned on him in maudlin rage.

"It 's all I 'll ever git with any help o' your'n," he raged, "but I kin do a thing er two yet, off 'n my own bat. By God! Just you lemme git my two hands on the feller 'n I 'll twist his windpipe good 'n' plenty!"

He gasped for breath, tearing at the band of his shirt.

"I 'll kill 'im," he swore. "D' ye think I 'll let 'im live when he 's took the bread out o' my mouth like he done?"

Westcott regarded him with narrowed eyes.

"You 'd be a blasted fool to stand it," he said, speaking very low, "any set of men are fools to let another man ride over them; but they 're bigger fools if they don't keep their mouths shut."

"That 's so," one of the men commented. "You fellers wanter look out. This here Gard you 're talkin' about 's a stranger to me, an' I d' know all he 's done, but such talk 's plumb dangerous."

He shook his head with drunken gravity.

"Wha 'd you wanter kill 'im for?" he asked of Broome.

"I tell ye he 's a damned murderer," was the reply. "He 'd oughter be killed."

"Is that right?" The man who did not know Gard turned to Westcott with a profoundly judicial air.

"Why ain't he hung then?" he went on. "How d' you know he 's guilty?"

Westcott hesitated, considering. He did not look at the questioner.

"I saw the whole story written out in his own hand," he finally said, with a curious glitter in his half-veiled eyes. "I 've just been up north trying to have him arrested," he continued. "Broome here knows that; but I found the matter 'd been patched up."

"Hell! That ain't no ways right." The speaker steadied himself, and regarded the lawyer severely.

"They ain't no justice in that," he resumed. "Murder 's murder; an' the punishment for murder 's hanging. I d'mand t' know why he ain't hung?"

"You 'll have to answer your own question," was the quiet reply. "What are you going to do about that?"

"I know what I 'd do about it," Broome spoke

this time. "I 'd hang 'im myself, quick 's that," snapping his fingers, "if I got the chance."

"Lynching 's gone out of style," sneered Westcott. "We 're law-abiding in Arizona now."

"Law be damned," Broome blustered. "Lynching 's too good fer 'im; but it 'd serve, I guess."

The word passed from one to another of the drunken group. The men looked at one another, and fell into a confused discussion.

"Did you say you saw that there confession in his own handwrite?" the stranger presently turned to ask of Westcott, but the lawyer had already hurried away.

"Don't you worry none about that," Broome answered for him, with an oath. "I tell ye, Hickey, I know what I 'm talkin' about. The man 's an escaped jail-bird that was in fer murder. He 's dodged the law, but hell! he ain't dodged Thad Broome yet!"

The talk went on among the men, but Westcott was not there to hear it. He had seen to it that he should not be, and was well on his way back to town.

He had not put the idea into their heads, he told himself. Nor was it likely that anything would come of their drunken vaporings.

But if anything should— His heart was beating excitedly, and his breath came quick as the possibilities of the situation hammered at his brain.

"Curse the fellow," he muttered. "The very devil himself is always sending him my way. Well, whatever happens to him this trip he 's brought it upon himself."

He walked on, his thoughts growing more definite.

"Nothing can be proved against me," they ran. "I can't be supposed to know what a lot of drunken punchers are likely to do. The fool ought to have been careful how he interfered with them.

"Still, if anything *should* happen," caution suggested, "I may as well be away from here."

He glanced at his watch.

"Too late for the afternoon train," he reflected. "But there 's the mixed freight at nine-thirty. I might ride over to the junction and get Billy Norton to stop that for me. I 'll do that. Plenty of time after supper. Yes: that is what I will do."

He did not continue his walk, but sought the little hotel and shut himself into his room, explaining to the friendly proprietor that he was dead tired, and wanted to make up lost sleep.

CHAPTER XII

SANDY LARCH had driven to Bonesta to meet Mrs. Hallard, Unricht's telephone message having reached the Palo Verde in due season. The cowboys were all out on the range. There was no one about the corrals when Gard reached the rancho. He had not expected that anyone would be, but the place seemed curiously quiet and deserted. A bunch of future polo-ponies in one enclosure were the only creatures in sight as he rode on toward the casa. These nickered to his own horse and the sound brought Wing Chang to the door of his adobe kitchen. The Chinaman's face wrinkled in a genial smile as he recognized Gard. The latter waved a hand to him and turned toward the horse-rail; for he had caught sight of a slender figure under the cottonwoods.

She rose from the low chair in which she had been sitting, reading, and awaited his coming, there beneath the trees. She was dressed, as usual, in white—a soft, clinging serge to-day, for the

December afternoons were growing cool—and she stood, serene and quiet, smiling welcome as he approached, but the eyes veiled by her long lashes were like stars. Gard's heart cried out to her as he took the slim little hand she held out to him in greeting. He felt like a man reprieved. There was no aversion in her look or manner. Westcott could not yet have wholly blackened his good name before her.

"So you have come back to find everybody gone," Helen said, offering him the long chair he remembered so well. "This seems to belong to you."

He declined it—his errand was not one that invited the soul to ease—and took, instead, a camp-stool near the little garden table. Patsy, who had been lying beneath it, came to greet the guest, with wagging recognition.

"There 's nobody gone that I came to see," Gard answered her remark with a directness that brought the long lashes still further over those starry eyes. Helen had seen him coming far on the desert; had recognized him with a quick, exultant leap of the heart, and had schooled herself to serenity, stilling the tumult within long ere he stood before her.

Nevertheless, she was exquisitely aware of his presence; aware too, that the secret fear of her heart, lest memory might after all have played her

false with reference to this man, was dispelled. This was indeed the Gard of her musings. Her veiled eyes took swift woman-cognizance of him; of the strength and poise of his spare, supple frame; the clean wholesomeness of his rugged good looks.

Almost before he spoke, however, she was conscious that something vaguely portentous pulsed beneath the quiet of his manner; something which her own mood failed of grasping. He was stirred to the depths by something not wholly of the present moment. The joyous light of that first instant of meeting had faded from his face, and a shadowy trouble lurked deep within his eyes. She raised her own to meet it with the steady, level glance he remembered as peculiarly her own, seeking to answer the need of his soul.

Gard's courage was near to failing. It came home to him with terrible force as he met her pure glance, what a monstrous thing this was that he had brought to lay before her sweet, untroubled consciousness. He would have given his life to keep sorrow from her; yet he was hungering this moment to tell her his own.

But he could not let her hear it from other lips than his, and he believed that she must inevitably hear the tale very soon. In a flash he saw, too, that if she but believed him that belief would rob

the knowledge of its malignant power. The friendliness of her eyes calmed the storm in his spirit. In that instant he loved her supremely; but for the moment she was more the friend to whose soul he longed to lay bare his own, than the woman he loved, whose faith he longed to feel assurance of.

He had no knowledge of the arts of circumlocution. He drew from his pocket a folded paper and began his story where, in his thought, he had meant to end it.

"I have brought you something to keep for me," he said, opening out the paper and handing it to her.

She looked it over wonderingly. There was a rough sketch of a mountain-range, with one peak indicated by a little cross. At one side was a little map, with directions and distances plainly set out, and half a page of minute instructions as to routes and trails. Gard's training in the surveyor's gang had served him in good stead here.

"What is it, precisely?" the girl asked; for complete as it seemed, there was no word to indicate just what it was intended to show.

"That 's what I want to tell you," was his answer. "It was n't best to put *too* much on the paper. I got taught that the other day; but what is set down there would guide you straight to my gold-mine if ever you wanted to go."

She flushed, slightly.

"Why should I ever want to go?" she asked, on the defensive against his eyes. "Don't prospectors generally consider it imprudent to show such things as this?"

"Awfully imprudent. You must put it away where it will be very safe, and keep it for me."

"But why do you wish *me* to keep it? I think you are rash." Helen held the paper toward him, but he put her hand back, pleadingly.

"Please keep it for me," he urged; "I—I wish it above all things. I am afraid—I expect to have to go away for a time, to a place where *I* could not keep it—for a long time, perhaps."

"Where do you expect to go?" Helen strove to keep out of her voice the dismay that was in her heart.

"There was a boy, once," he said, apparently not hearing her question. "He was n't a bad boy as boys go, but you could n't have called him a good boy, either. And he was n't smart, and he was n't stupid." Gard looked out across the desert, considering.

"This boy went away from home the way boys do. He thought it was slow on the farm back in Iowa; and he drifted out to Arizona . . ."

He paused. He found the story even harder to tell than he had expected. Helen, watching him intently, leaned toward him ever so slightly.

"I want to hear about the boy," she said, softly, and Gard went on, without looking at her.

"He got out to Arizona and went prospecting. He found a claim, and had it jumped. He got some dust together, and lost it. He lost a good many things; his real name, for one thing, and a lot of other things it does boys good to keep. He was getting into bad ways; getting mighty worthless; and then he got into trouble."

Gard's face was pale under its tan, and a white dint showed in either nostril. Helen was studying the sketch of the mountains.

"A man was killed—"

The girl gave a little gasp, and Gard turned to her quickly.

"The boy did n't do it," he cried. "Before Heaven! he had n't anything to do with it. Miss Anderson—" He bent toward her, eagerly. "Can't you believe—no matter what comes up—won't you—oh, you must believe that the boy had n't anything to do with it!"

Her eyes were on his face, searching it as though she would read his hidden thoughts.

"I can believe that," she said at last, "if you say it is true."

He drew a deep, tremulous breath.

"Tell me exactly what happened," Helen urged, and the way opened, he went on with the whole

pitiful, sordid story, the girl listening, never flinching, though her very lips grew white when he told her what his sentence had been.

He told her of his escape, but omitted mention of his visit to Blue Gulch. He did not bring Westcott's name in at all, or dwell upon the treachery he had met with. He told of finding Mrs. Hallard's deed; of his search for her, and of the trouble he had found her in, and Helen's heart warmed toward him because of what he still did not say; for she recognized Westcott's share in this matter. He came at last to the lost packet, and the danger that he was in if anyone found it.

"I think somebody has it," he said, "and that somebody will be getting after me. I am going to try to move first; but may be I sha' n't be able to."

"Do you think it was Mr. Westcott who found those papers?" Helen asked, suddenly, and Gard started.

"Did he say anything to you?" he demanded. "What did he tell you?"

She drew herself up, proudly.

"I am not in Mr. Westcott's confidence," she said. "He has never spoken to me on the subject."

"Sandy and I, we *do* think that," Gard admitted. "He, Mr. Westcott, ain't a friend of mine," he added, "and if he did find them I 'm sure to hear from him before long."

Helen pondered his words. She knew, in various ways, that Westcott was not friendly to this man. She began now to understand why, and she realized that the attorney could be a venomous foe.

"Any one of the others would have handed the papers over to Sandy, would they not?" she asked, and before Gard could reply turned to answer Jacinta, who was calling anxiously from the house.

"Jacinta thinks it 's getting too cool out here," she explained, laughingly. "It troubles her if she thinks I am running risks. Shall we go into the house?"

The afternoon was waning. Gard hesitated.

"I must be getting back," he said, following her, "but I 'd like to explain that diagram to you. I want you to have it in case . . . if anything should happen, I—want it to be yours. You get your father to have some work done on it, and file the claim right for you. My filing—is n't legal."

The words came hard, and the color mounted to his forehead. The girl's hands were trembling. Outside the sound of men's voices came vaguely on the afternoon stillness.

"Is it as late as that?" Helen asked, surprised. "Are the men getting back?"

Glancing out of the window they saw Wing

Chang coming from the kitchen to the house. Near the kitchen door a man on horseback was waiting.

"Mistlee Glad!" Chang's yellow visage wore a startled look as he appeared in the doorway of the big living room.

"Man outside," he said, addressing Gard. "Four, fi' men; holler; swear; say you come out. Say you gotta come out."

The man by the kitchen door now rode forward.

"Hey, you, Misher Barker, Gard, whatever you call yourself," he yelled thickly, "come out 'n that in th' name o' law o' Arizona!"

"Oh!" Helen cried, "what does he want?"

Gard turned to her with agony in his face.

"It 's—what—we—thought—might happen, I guess," he said.

"Has—has someone come to take you? Don't go! Don't let them take you! Oh, surely there is some other way!" The girl's voice was full of horror. "Oh!" she moaned, "if only my father were here! Or Sandy!" She looked at him with eyes whose revelation almost broke the man down.

"Be you comin', in there?" the thick voice outside sounded nearer. "They 'sh plenty of ush to take you," it went on. "Y' ain't goin' to hide in there along o' no girl, Misher murderer!—We 'll

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take you both 'f you don't come out 'n be quick 'bout it!"

Gard caught the words and his face grew suddenly stern. He opened the door and stepped outside. The man on horseback swerved, at sight of him, and galloped back a little distance to where his fellows had come up. Gard could still distinguish them all in the increasing dusk.

"Come out here you damned murderer!"

It was Broome's voice, malignant and thick.

"You 're goin' git what 's comin' to you this time," he added, tauntingly.

There was no mistaking the menace of the group; Gard realized, as he surveyed it, that this was no posse, but a band of drunken cowboys ripe for any mischief. At all hazards, he must keep them from the house.

"Ride the murderer down!" someone roared, drunkenly. But none of the men moved nearer to attack the motionless figure on the door stone.

Gard was thinking fast, and the burden of his thought was the girl shivering on the other side of the door. He must get these men away. She must not know.

Deliberately he stepped back into the room. As the door closed behind him a bullet buried itself in the upper panel with a savage "ping!" amid a chorus of savage yells. Helen was at the window,

ears and eyes strained to the scene without. She came toward him, swiftly.

"You must not go out there!" she cried. "Those men are not officers; they mean harm!"

Her hand touched his arm lightly in terrified appeal. The white womanliness of her upturned face made his heart ache with tenderness. His soul thrilled to a trembling sense of the sweet possibilities of life. Then the instinct of the protector awoke.

"I must go," he said, speaking low and fast. "I must go now; I must meet these men and—and have it out with them. It is the only way. But I 'm coming back. Don't you worry. I 'm coming back clear and clean—"

"Don't go!" she whispered in terror; for he was moving toward a long French window that opened toward the cottonwoods.

"I must!" His voice was tense with pain. Outside, he knew, death lurked for him—just when life had grown so precious! But more precious still was this slim, white girl. For her sake he must draw the evil crew away from the casa. She must not know!

"Kick in the door! The patron 's away! The coward 's hiding there with—yah!"

A fleeing figure burst from the shelter of the cottonwoods, Gard's horse still stood at the rail,

the bridle-reins on the ground. The drunken horsemen turned their own mounts and blundered confusedly against one another as their quarry, with a defiant shout that left them no doubt as to his identity, threw himself upon his horse and dashed away into the gloom. In an instant they rallied from their confusion, and wheeling, were after him.

Gard made for the great rancho gate. He knew the horse he bestrode; knew that it was not in the mongrel brute's poor power to carry him far, at any speed; but at least he had a start, and was leading his pursuers away from the Palo Verde.

"Head 'im off there!"

"Shoot him!"

"Damn it! Don't shoot! Catch the damned sneaking dog an' we 'll string 'im up!" It was Broome's voice.

The words were borne to Wing Chang's horrified ears and he raised his own high, falsetto tones, in a cry of warning to Gard. Helen, hovering beside the door, heard also, and rushed out.

"Chang! Chang!" she called, gathering her skirts as she made for the corrals; "come and help me saddle Dickens!"

She seized him by the arm and literally pushed him before her. "Quick!" she cried. "You catch the horse. I 'll get the saddle."

She must get help. She meant to ride out and meet the men who must soon be returning from the range. She was coming from a shed, bearing saddle and bridle, when Sandy Larch and Mrs. Hallard drove through the great gate. Wing Chang rushed toward them, shrieking.

"Slandy! Slandy man!" he wailed, forgetful of the discipline the foreman was wont to enforce in the matter of his name. "You savee him! Makee dlam hully up! Savee him!"

"What 's eatin' you?" Sandy roared, struggling with his startled horses. "What 's the matter? Talk straight you fool heathen! Save who?"

"Mistlee Glad! They killee him! Go! Go!"

Wing Chang's hands beat the air as though he could thus impel the listener forward. Helen now ran up and Mrs. Hallard caught her hand, leaning forward eagerly.

"What is it?" she cried, and the girl explained, in quick, excited sentences.

"We must get out there quick," she said. She turned with a glad cry: in their preoccupation they had not heard the cowboys, who came galloping in for supper, singing as they rode.

Sandy Larch now comprehended the situation sufficiently to act. He gave a few quick orders, and in a moment half a dozen of the men had faced about and were riding over the desert.

"Round up anything you see," the foreman shouted after them.

"I 'll be with you in a jerk."

He meant to leave Helen and Mrs. Hallard at the casa, but they refused to listen to such a plan. Helen sprang into the buckboard, and as the last horseman swept out at the gate the sweating team was in pursuit.

Four of the men rode out upon the plain. Two, of whom Manuel was one, kept to the road, and after these Sandy lashed his horses. He came up with them a mile beyond the gate. Manuel was off his bronco, studying some tracks that just here turned abruptly from the way.

"They must have turned off here," Sandy said, springing out and straining his eyes to make out the hoof-prints in the baffling gloom. "Gard 's got a poor horse. They headed him off."

"Oh!" Helen cried, wringing her hands. "Why did n't he ride back to the rancho?"

"Gard would n't do that, with you alone there," answered Sandy. "But oh, Lord! Why did n't some of us turn up sooner?"

Sago Irish, who had ridden out upon the plain, while Manuel studied the hoof-prints, now came back.

"Did you pick up the trail?" the foreman demanded, sharply.

The cowboy shook his head.

"Sand 's too hard," he said, sorrowfully, "an' it 's gettin' too dark."

Sandy's eyes searched the dusky landscape. He was breathing hard.

"Cannot we do *something,*" Helen pleaded, in a voice of agony.

"If they catch the señor—" Manuel spoke very low, but the women's straining ears caught the words—"they will ride off where is the little west fork. There they find—"

A word from the foreman hushed his speech. Sandy turned his horses and in an instant they were flying in the direction Manuel had indicated. For the first time Kate Hallard's nerve was shaken.

"Oh, my God!" she muttered, "Manuel meant they 'd find *trees!*"

As she spoke a revolver shot rang out distantly, upon the air, and with a wild yell the two cowboys dashed off, leaving those in the buckboard to follow.

CHAPTER XIII

SO this was to be the end!

Gard, securely roped, stood with his back against a cottonwood tree, looking at his captors. There was no mistaking their condition, and they left him in no doubt as to their intentions.

He had not expected this. Re-arrest; re-imprisonment: these had presented themselves to his mind as possibilities; he had not looked to win justice and reinstatement without a struggle, but this—surely no sane mind could have foreseen it as a possibility.

The quick dusk of mid-December had fallen, but one of the men was provided with a stock-lantern. This had been lighted, and threw a miserable glare upon the sodden faces of the men who had him in their power. He glanced from one to the other, finding ground for hope in none.

It was Broome who had captured him. The cowboy had secured the loan of a fellow puncher's

horse, standing at the rail before Jim Bracton's saloon. It was a good horse, more than a match for the indifferent beast Gard rode. There had been a mad race across the desert, a realizing sense that the danger was real and imminent, and Gard was in the act of drawing his revolver when the rope that Broome flung settled over his shoulders, and pinned his arms down.

"Now you know how it feels, damn you!" Broome said, when the crowd had their captive bound and again in saddle.

"But you don't git no blindfold," he sneered. "You 're goin' to see all that 's a'comin' to you, good 'n' plain." Broome's face was thrust into his, drunken, distorted, malignant.

"Now my fine Mister Barker-Gard," the thick voice snarled, "it 's prayers fer your'n. You 've killed your last man, you sneakin' coyote you. You 'll swing in jest about two minutes."

There was a growl of assent from two of the others, and Gard recognized them as the same two ruffians that were fleecing Papago Joe when he had quietly but effectively stopped their game. The fourth man was a stranger to him. It was this one who carried the lantern, and he now held it unsteadily on high, surveying the prisoner with drunken gravity.

"Tell ye what," he announced to Broome,

"Thish 'ere thing 's gotter be done right. Thish 'a free 'n glorioush country. We don't hang no man 'thout 'n he gits a fair trial."

"Trial be damned!" Broome roared. "Don't you go bein' no fool Sam Hickey. This feller 's bin tried an' found guilty long of a real judge 'n jury, already."

Hickey turned upon him with inebriate severity.

"If you wa'n't so dangnation drunk, Broome," he said, "I 'd swat ye fer that remark. But y' ain't responsible now; that 's whatch y' ain't; Thish 'ere thing 's gotter be done decent, I tell you. We ain't no murderers. We 'sh populash o' Arizona, seein' justice done; an' damn you, we 're goin' to see it."

"You bet we be!" interjected one of the others. "An' quick! This feller 's *had* his trial."

"Not s' fast, Hank." Hickey swung the lantern perilously.

"There 'sh a judge, thash me; an' there 'sh jury, thash gotter be you fellers. There—now. Thash all fixed."

Oh, God! Was it really to end in this tragic farce? Gard pondered it with a sick heart. If it was, why could he not have died in the storm, with Arnold, two years ago?

He realized the futility of any appeal to the creatures before him. They were drunk; irre-

sponsible as dogs at play, and they held his life in their hands. His life: with all its new hope, and love, and aspiration! Moreover, three of them hated him. He owed even these few more moments of breath to the maudlin vagary of the one who did not know him.

"Prish'ner at the bar," Hickey was mumbling, "You are accusht o' bein' convicted o' the murder o'—Who 'n hell was it he murdered, Broome?"

He turned to Broome with an effort at dignity that nearly flung the lantern in the latter's face. Broome dodged it, with an oath.

"Dan Lundy, you slitherin' fool," he snarled, "Git ahead with your lingo, or we 'll swing you when he 's done fer."

Hickey ignored the threat.

"Well, prish'ner at the bar, guilty er not guilty?"

"Not guilty! I never touched Lundy," Gard said, earnestly. "I found him dead in his shack, and they came in just as I was trying to lift him up."

"Corsh: corsh: very proper to pleade 'not guilty'. Reg'ler thing—we 'd a' hung ye anyway if yer had n't—fer 'n example! As 'tish, we 've gi'n you fair tri'l. Be there anything you wanter say, before thish court perceeds t' ex'cute sentensh?"

Gard's soul was in revolt.

"Hickey," he said, speaking very slowly and distinctly, "This is murder you men are doing. You 'll know it when you are sober."

As the lantern cast its light upon Hickey's face it seemed to Gard that he looked startled. He realized, with a sick feeling of helplessness that the fellow's participation in this deed was due solely to his condition. He even felt a sort of pity for the man when to-morrow's awakening should bring the knowledge of what he had done. If he could but reach the real man buried in the addled brain.

"I did not kill Dan Lundy," he insisted, still addressing Hickey; "You will know that some day. Killing me to-night will not be the end of it. Death ain't such an awful thing that a man 's got to be afraid of it, beyond a certain point. We 've all got to die some time; so it stands to reason it can't be such a bad thing as we think. But if I do die to-night, you 'll be alive yet, to-morrow morning, Hickey, and what do you think you 'll do about it then?"

Hickey was staring at him, his jaw loosened, the lantern hanging in a listless hand.

"Aw, shut up," interrupted Broome. "You 've said all you got any call to say. We know there 's bin a mistake made, n' we 're goin' to fix it up right here. You savez?"

Gard ignored him, still looking at Hickey.

"Know Mrs. Hallard?" he asked, with the quiet of desperation. Since by no endurable possibility could he send a message where, alone, he longed to, he must at least get one word to Kate Hallard.

"Yesh;" was Hickey's reply. "Know Missish Hallard. Mighty fine lady."

"Will you tell Mrs. Hallard," he cast about for words that should guide Mrs. Hallard without enlightening these ruffians. "Try to remember this, please. Tell Mrs. Hallard that Sawyer 's all right. Tell her not to give in to anybody. Anybody, I say. Tell her not to be afraid. Will you remember?"

Hickey carried his lantern a little distance away and set it down at the foot of a tree.

"I 'll tell 'er"; he said, gravely. "Hate ter hang a frien' o' Missish Hallard," he added, "just plum hate ter do 't; but you see yourself how 'tish; law 's gotter take its course; so we gotter hang you."

"Where 's your rope?" one of the men now demanded, and it was developed that the only rope in the company was the horse-hair riata with which Gard was bound.

"Take it off n' hang 'im with that," Hickey ordered, and three men laid hold of their victim, while Broome proceeded, savagely, to loosen his bonds. A wild hope sprang up in Gard's heart.

It seemed as if Broome would never get done fumbling with the rope, but at last it fell away from his feet. His arms were already untied, but three men held them.

With a quick wrench he shook one free and planted a blow in Broome's face. The fellow went down, heavily, and Gard fell upon the three others, glorying that at least he could die fighting.

But he did not mean to die. If he could but get an instant's start he could back his sober wits against their drunken ones, in the darkness.

Hickey proved unequal to battle, and a single thrust put him temporarily out of the fight. Then Gard heard Broome's voice.

"Shoot 'im! Shoot 'im, somebody!" he roared, and Gard realized that one of the men he struggled with had drawn a gun.

He seized the hand that held the weapon, and there was a three-cornered fight for its possession.

Broome was on his feet, now, trying to find a point of attack. Gard was doing more than fight for the gun. He was gradually forcing activities in the direction of the horses. If only he could shake free for an instant, and make a run for it! He meant to secure Broome's mount. In a dash for freedom he felt that the odds would be with him.

Broome had by now got into the struggle again, and hurled himself, from behind, upon the man he hated. Gard felt the fellow's great hands closing about his throat, when suddenly, the revolver for which he was fighting was discharged.

Broome sank back with a yell and a moment later, somewhere, far out on the plain, another revolver cracked.

"Somebody 's coming!" the fellow called "Hank" gasped out, wrenching free. "We 'd better git!"

The sense of approaching danger sobered him, for the instant, and he sprang toward his horse. The other fellow would have followed, but Gard held him fast. He, too, realized that help was at hand, and the realization renewed his strength. A moment later, with wild yells, and a rush of swift hoofs, two riders dashed up.

Hank threw himself into the saddle. Manuel Gordo was quicker than he, however, and bore him to the ground with one sweep of a heavy arm, while Sago Irish, Manuel's mate, dashed to Gard's assistance. His ready rope had already secured the fellow called "Jim," when the buckboard appeared, Sandy lashing his broncos to a mad run.

The stars were out, lighting the sky with a brilliance that shamed the lantern's yellow glow, and Gard's heart leaped when he saw the lithe figure

that sprang from the back-seat, as Sandy Larch brought the horses to their haunches.

The foreman was already hurrying to his friend, but he stopped short as Gard, never seeing him, turned toward Helen. Mrs. Hallard, too, had fallen behind, and the two stood face to face in the bright starlight.

"Helen!"

It was all that Gard could say, but his voice was full of wonder, and joy. He never noticed that he had called the girl by her first name.

Nor did she. For an instant she poised, bird-like, her shining eyes seeking his. All thought of their surroundings had fallen away from both; there was for them, in that moment; only the holy mystery of love, filling their souls. He held out his arms and she came to him as naturally as a child seeks its mother.

Neither spoke. His face was against the bewildering fragrance of her hair as her head lay upon his breast. He held her close, in the safe, sweet haven of his arms.

He tried to raise her face, that he might see it, but she kept it hidden, blessing the kind, wise stars, that would not reveal her scarlet cheeks.

"Look up, darling! Oh, my love, let me see your eyes!"

For answer her arms stole up to his neck, and

she clung the closer against the strong, brave heart that had borne so much.

"Did they hurt you?" she whispered. "Are you all safe now? Oh, oh, my dear heart—what if you had not been!"

She was trembling from head to foot. He took her two hands in one of his, carrying them to his lips.

"I am all right," he said, "if I can only be sure I am awake. But how *can* I believe you are here if I do not see your face?"

She raised it at last, turning it up to his gaze under the pure starlight, and the sight held him in a hush of wonder.

"You see it *is* I." She forced a little smile to her trembling lips, and looked at him, half afraid.

"Yes, yes," he whispered, "it really is. And you came to me. Don't go away, will you? Don't ever, ever leave me!"

CHAPTER XIV

YELLING wildly through the night, the other Palo Verde riders came pounding over the sand. Sandy Larch, who, with Mrs. Hallard, had been investigating the extent of Broome's injuries, straightened up.

"Where 's Westcott?" he shouted. "Any of you seen the black hound? Wing Chang said he had something to do with this business."

Broome gave a sort of howl, whether of pain or of protest, no one heeded, no one cared. The new-comers crowded around the foreman.

"Where is he?" They demanded, excitedly, "Which way 'd 'e go?"

"Search me," was Sandy's reply. "He must a' drifted before I come up. All I know is Wing Chang said he was one o' the devils after Gard."

Hickey, who had been taken with the others, roused from his drunken slumber at the sound of Westcott's name.

"He ain't here," he muttered, "Weshcott 's in

Sylvania, takin' care of 's health. Thash where he ish."

The cowboys were off before he had finished, and as no one noticed him, he slumbered again.

"What will they do with him?" whispered Helen. She had drawn away from Gard when the others appeared, but he still held her hand.

"Nothing, dear," he replied. "They won't find him. He 's safe at Sylvania. I only wish you were as far away from here as he is."

"She will be in a shake," Sandy Larch called, overhearing him. "An' so 'll you be, too."

Sandy had assured himself that bad whiskey and rage were more responsible for Broome's groans than the bullet which had shattered his collar-bone, and ploughed his shoulder. The fellow's howls and oaths had been silenced by a kick, and no longer made night hideous.

"Sago," Sandy said, turning to one of his cowboys, "I reckon you 'n' Manuel 's equal to the care o' these citizens. They kin all sit their horses, I guess, an' you two kin ride herd on 'em, into Sylvania. I 'd gather in their guns, if 't was me doin' it, on' leave 'em with fatty Harkins till mornin'. I dare say they 'll be some peacabler by then."

The foreman had already eased Broome's shoulder, crudely enough, by means of an arm-sling,

improvised from the riata that the fellow had meant to use for Gard.

"He 'll do till he gits to Sylvania," he said, with an indifference that was not feigned, "Mebby there 'll be somebody there to tend to 'im." And he left the would-be lynchers to the tender mercies of their captors.

Ashley Westcott was mounting his hired horse in front of the hotel, when a stranger, on a hard-ridden, pacing buckskin, stopped beside the rail.

"Say, friend," he drawled, catching sight of the lawyer, "Your name happen to be Westcott?"

"Is that any of your business?" snapped the owner of the name.

"Not a bit," was the calm reply, "an' I don't care a damn. It only happened I was rounded-up, awhile back, by a parcel of fellers 't said they was from the Palo Verde. They 'd mistook me fer you, an' you sure have some enthusiastic friends. They 're a whoopin' it up yet, I guess, 'lowin' they 're seekin' your society."

"Who were they?" Westcott asked.

"I did n't exchange no cards with the gents," the stranger replied, grinning. "'T was enough fer me to know they was friends o' yourn'. An' seein' you now, to realize your lovely disposition, I don't know 's I wonder at the warmth o' the feelin'

they showed fer you. They may be yer dearest friends," he went on, more seriously, "an' you may be goin' to meet 'em this minute, but what I sót out to say was, that if a party o' *my* dearest friends was lookin' fer me in the tone o' voice them fellers was exhibitin' I 'd either stay where I was, if I thought it was a good place, er I 'd git on my nag an' I 'd drift, mighty lively."

"Bah!" was Westcott's reply, as he got into the saddle. "I don't know why anyone should be hunting for me, and I 'm not afraid of them if they are. People generally know where to find me if they have business with me. . . . Thank you, though," he muttered, recollecting himself.

"You 're sure welcome," the stranger said, turning away, as the lawyer rode down the street.

"You 're sure good an' welcome," he added, to himself, "to all 'ts likely comin' to you."

"THERE are a lot of things I 've got to straighten out."

It was Gard, who spoke, from his place beside Sandy Larch in the buckboard.

"I think, too," he added, addressing Sandy, a note of sadness in his tone, "that I must tell you good friends about them, right away."

No one spoke, but before he had time to wonder at their silence Helen leaned forward and thrust

into his hands a big, official-looking envelop, which Mrs. Hallard had given her, with a few whispered words of explanation.

"What 's this?" Gard asked, peering at it in the uncertain light.

Helen laughed, happily and Sandy Larch gave a low chuckle.

"It 's something that 'll interest you a lot," said he, "an' I reckon it 'll keep; but good Lord, Gard! Why 'n't you ever let on?" Sandy's voice was full of loving reproach.

"If you 'd only put me hip," he continued, "a word 'd a' fixed it. But I get the shivers yet, thinkin' o' all might 'a' happened."

"Don't, Sandy," pleaded Helen. She was still trembling, with excitement and horror.

"Tell him; quick!" she urged.

"Tell me what?" Gard was dizzy with weariness and bewilderment. He held his big envelop up, trying to make out what it was.

"To think—" Sandy was still unable, for very eagerness, to come to the point. "Who 'd a dreamt you never knew Jim Texas confessed, after all!"

"Confessed?" Gard's voice thrilled with sudden joy.

"God! But it 's good to be a free man again!" he said softly, and the low spoken words sent a

thrill through his hearers. Years of suffering seemed expressed in them.

Then the others' tongues were loosened, and by the time the Palo Verde was reached, the story had been pieced together, bit by bit.

"Friends," Gard said, as they walked together from the corrals to the casa, "I don't know what to say; but I—I sure thank you."

He bared his head, and looked up at the stars. They were still there, swinging their ancient round as they had done, night after night, above the glade.

"Yes," he said, speaking to them as often and often he had done before, when he watched their solemn progress across the sky. "You knew. You told me 't would come out all right, and it has."

Then, as Jacinta appeared in the doorway, full of anxiety about Helen, they went into the house.

"I 'll see you to-morrow morning," Gard said an hour later, to Helen, as they stood together near the cottonwoods. Sandy had gone to the corral for the horses; he meant to ride back to Sylvania with his friend. Helen had persuaded Mrs. Hallard to remain at the haçienda for the night.

"I must see you just a little while," Gard said, "before I go away."

"Go away?"

Helen's voice was full of surprise as she repeated his words. "Where are you going?" she asked; for he was smiling down at her as though the thought of separation gave him pleasure.

"Mexico," was the reply. "Sandy says your father is down in Sonora."

"Why, yes: but he will be home within a week. He would n't be away over Christmas."

"I know; but I can't wait. I 've got to see him. I 've got to ask him—" Gard's voice sank to a whisper, "I 've got to ask him what he 's going to give me for Christmas."

"Oh!" the girl's shyness held them both silent for a moment, ere she found speech again.

"I know what *I* want," she presently said, edging away from the other matter.

"What?"

The word sounded like a guarantee that what she wanted would be forthcoming.

"Jinny."

They both laughed, like children, at the idea.

"Jinny 's yours," Gard said, promptly: "but she 'nd I go together. We can't be parted. I could n't bear the separation."

"Perhaps—" He had to bend his head to catch the low-spoken words--"Perhaps—Father's Christmas present will—will reconcile you."

What his answer was is not of record. There was but a moment to give to it; for a whistle from Sandy presently warned Gard that his horse was ready, and the two whispered their good-night, in the friendly darkness.

CHAPTER XV

GARD and Helen were married late in January. Gard's patience, and hard-won philosophy, seemed wholly to desert him at the thought of longer delay.

"One would think," Helen laughed, as he pleaded with her to set an earlier day, "that you were afraid I might vanish."

"I am," answered Gard. "I always have been, from the minute I saw you come around the corner of the house that morning, with your tray and grape-fruit, I 've been expecting I 'd wake up some day and find that this part of the dream is n't true."

Helen's cheek lingered against the hand which he put out as if to reassure himself of her presence.

"It is true," she said, softly, "truer than the other parts, the hard, cruel parts. *They* are the things that have vanished, dear."

"I guess you 're right," was Gard's reply.

"They were the dream, and this is the waking-up; the blessed waking-up."

"Do you know," he suddenly said, "it was the longest kind of a time—up in the mountain—before I got over being afraid, just before I 'd open my eyes in the morning?"

"Afraid?"

"Yes. That I might see—might *not* see—the open."

"Yes, dear?"

Helen spoke quietly, though it seemed to her as if her suffocating heart beats must betray to him what she was feeling. Gard had told her of his escape from the cloudburst; all the incidents of his Robinson Crusoe life, as she called it, of the coming of the camel; of that wonderful journey to the glade; of the glade itself; but this he had never spoken of. She had thought of it as a door in his heart yet closed against her. Now it was opening, to admit her to his chamber of sorrow.

"I don't know what kept me alive through those other years," he continued. "Sometimes it seems to me there was n't much there worth keeping alive. There was n't much got away but a rack of bones, held together by hate."

Helen's hands stole out and found both his as he went on.

"I thought I 'd got to get out," he seemed as

if thinking aloud, "I thought I 'd got to get out some day, just to kill Westcott. Then when I did get away, I had n't anything left but the longing to crawl off somewhere and die. I 'm not sorry about that now, though often, in the mountain, I raged, to think I could n't have killed him that night. Then I learned better. But I feel mighty thankful now, that I never hurt him."

"You would never have hurt him," Helen murmured.

"There were times when I would if I could have got to him," Gard replied, "but I got over my hate. Somehow, that kind of thing can't live in big, clean places like that I drifted to. The desert 's a hard place, my girl. It don't look lovely as this when you 're fighting for life in it. It 's fierce as a tiger, but there ain't any hate in it. That 's only in men, but it 's deadlier than anything the desert 's got."

"There 's got to be desert, I guess. There was a man in the surveyor's gang I was with once, years ago, always said that. He said you take away the desert and some of the glorious climates on this slope would all be gone."

"I 'm talking a lot"; he interrupted himself with half a laugh, "but just once, this thing 's got to be looked at; because it was so black, and I can't let you think I was n't black with it. It

took that, I guess, along with the rest of it all, to make me see things the way I do now; but I ain't asking pity for it. It was a desert place, sure enough, but now it 's over. I guess I learned some things worth while. Then when I got out on the big desert, dear, I found God there, same 's I 'd believed when I was a boy, back on the prairie. I should n't wonder if He 'd been there in the jail, too. That 's the truth of it."

The girl leaned quickly, and gathered both his hands to her lips, love, thankfulness, and pride in his manhood, all struggling for expression. Stout old Chaucer's brave words came to her mind, and she said them aloud, with lips yet trembling with tenderness.

"And truth thee shall deliver, it is no drede."

"That sounds like one of your old poets," he said, "and I guess he may have been in the desert and learned. 'There is no drede'," he repeated, thoughtfully. "I suppose he means no fear. That 's right."

He was looking into Helen's eyes, his two hands closing over hers.

"There is no fear," he asserted. "There is nothing *to* fear. Oh, girl—my girl! With hate gone, and love come in, there 's nothing in the wide world to fear!"

February was well along when first they saw

the glade together. Morgan Anderson and Gard had organized a company which, later, was to exploit the mine. Gard had seen to it that Sandy Larch had an interest, and Mrs. Hallard. Kate Hallard had gone away from Sylvania, but her matters were in good hands. She had sold her business to Sing Fat, and gone to California.

"For one thing," she had said to Helen, when the two had a long talk together. "I 'm goin' to learn t' talk decent. I can't stand it. Sometimes when I'm sittin' still, not sayin' a word, jes' listenin' to you, seems 's if the language I 'm thinkin' in is makin' a noise, it is so howlin' bad.

"Don't you think I don't know; ner don't you b'lieve it don't make no difference. It makes a difference inside me. I 'm sick of it. Sick of all 't means to me. I never had a chance to find it out before; but now I know, an' I can't bear it. I 'm goin' t' learn somethin', an' then, so long 's I always want to work—you could n't make a lady o' the likes o' me, not if you laid the money on with a trowel,—I 'm goin' to work at something worth while, an' if I ain't too old I 'm goin' to learn to be a nurse. Anyhow, it 's good-by the eatin' house fer mine!"

Helen and Gard went with the first outfit of mining-supplies to the claim. These were taken by wagon to the foot of the mountain, and thence,

up the trail, on the backs of the mules that had pulled them. Gard had gone for Jinny, bringing her by rail to Yuma, their point of departure, and she and Helen had become friends forthwith. Together they led the procession up the ancient wash; for Helen insisted upon walking, and her saddle horse and Gard's followed in the rear.

The glade lay in the pleasant afternoon sunshine much as it had done the day that Gard said good-by to it. A big live-oak branch had fallen across the ocotilla bed where he had often rested. Helen surveyed the rude structure with quivering lips, as he pulled the branch away.

Sandy Larch was unloading the animals, piling up the stores, and getting things into shape, with the help of the three men of the outfit. By the big fireplace against the rock Wing Chang, who had cast in his fortunes with the new company, was taking stock of Gard's culinary apparatus.

"What do you think of it, Chang?" the latter asked, as the cook investigated the upturned bean-pot.

"Where you catchee him?" the Chinaman demanded, much mystified.

"I made it. Made them all." Gard waved a hand at the various fire-blackened clay pots. Chang tapped the bean-kettle with an investigating knuckle, testing its soundness.

"Him no clacked," he said, with a grunt. "Mebby you no clacked; mebby so allee lightee."

And no further expression of opinion could be won from him.

Helen made a swift round of the place, Gard following, scarcely able to believe in his own happiness. She inspected the cabin, and cast her vote for living outside it. The seats and tables that Gard had contrived gave her great delight, and she rejoiced in the flaming green of the volunteer crop of oats into which Jinny had already found her wilful way.

"I dare say your gold mine 's all right, Gard," Sandy said, coming up to survey the oat patch, "but if it should n't be, there 's another one right on this here plain, if that water was turned acrost it."

"I vum!" He pulled a head of oats and examined it. "The Palo Verde 's a howlin' wilderness," he avowed, "to what a man could have here."

Gard laughed as he led Jinny ignominiously out of her green field.

"No reason why you should n't be that man," said he. "It 's government land, all ready to be entered upon."

"If that 's a fact," was Sandy's reply, "an' you ain't got no intentions on it, then Sandy Larch,

cow-punch, is likely to blossom out as A. Larch, rancherio. Can't you see me a swellin' señor?"

Wing Chang's bright fire was lighting up the trees and rocks when Helen, who had been bestowing her belongings inside the cabin, came out with something in her hands.

"What is this?" she demanded of Gard, still hovering near.

He took the big shell from her and stirred the palo verde thorns about, his mind a surge of emotions.

"What are those for?" Helen asked, again.

"Why," he said, at last, "they 're my tally of the days I lived in the glade."

She looked at them, in the twilight, her face touched with wonder.

"How many, many there seem to be," she murmured.

"There ought to be somewhere about seven hundred, I suppose," was Gard's reply. "We don't need 'em any more. Let 's help along the blaze with 'em."

She caught his hands, with a little cry of dismay.

"No! No!" cried she, "You must not destroy them! Your record of days; hard, thorny days." She covered the thorns with one hand, in a passionate gesture of protection.

"They were good days," he answered, trying to comfort her. "I got a lot of good out of them."

"But oh, the price you paid!" Tears glistened in her eyes.

They were in the shadow of a big live-oak, and he drew her to him.

"It was sure a *man's* price," he said, looking into her face. "But I got full value for it."

THE night was far spent when Gard awoke. A late moon rode high in the heavens, flooding the glade with white light. The familiarity of the scene bewildered his rousing consciousness. The circling trees, the murmur of water, the far-seeming faint glow of embers in the great fireplace, his narrow ocotilla bed with its bear-skin covering: how well he knew them all! Had he but slept and dreamed, to awaken after all to the daily round of his accustomed solitude?

He raised himself upon one elbow. On the cot which they had brought for her, there, within reach of his hand, Helen lay sleeping. A beam of the white light sifted down through encircling trees and fell across her face, round which the night wind had fluttered her hair to soft disorder. Her head was thrown back, her chin nestling in one supporting palm. The pure, tender outline of

brow and cheek thrilled him as he gazed, his soul touched to awe.

Long, long he looked, worship and wonder stirring the deeps of his nature. It was no dream; she was there beside him; there was no drede.

He sank back upon his pillow, tears of supreme happiness brimming his eyes, and yielded him wholly to the quiet and peace of the large place.

THE END.

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